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Doreen Serrano

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For Marcia: You believed in me when others didn't. I promise you won't regret it.

For Damian: My inspiration and my own private devil. It's time to say goodbye in this world.

For Alexa: My daughter who was taken away too soon; I'm coming for you.

Chapter 1

Christian Woman

Heather was sprawled across the couch on her stomach. Her left leg was thrown haphazardly over the back of the sofa and her right leg was slightly bent. She flung her arms up over her head and pushed her face into the back cushion.

A thin satin sheet decorated with the moon and stars covered her from the waist down. She had fallen asleep fully clad in the long gray T-shirt and white sweatpants she'd borrowed from Jade's drawer.

The sheet gathered at her hips served more for comfort than for warmth. Heather could tell from the inside of her sister's blind-enclosed living room that the day intended to scorch anyone who stumbled into it. She squinted against the thin ray of sunlight that had found its way through a crack in the blinds.

She wished she didn't have an appointment with Dr. Angel and considered skipping it to avoid the monstrous ball of heat lurking just outside the window. As a child, her big sister had tried to convince Heather she was an albino because her skin was so fair. Never a big fan of the sun, Heather would have preferred chewing glass to lying in the bright rays.

For years, she'd tried to make Lisa understand the sun only depressed her and depleted her of energy but her oldest sister refused to acknowledge her vampire tendencies. Instead, she had dubbed her Casper and openly teased her in front of her friends.

Heather simply insisted to anyone who would listen that her skin was creamy or milky white. It sounded prettier. Plus, she believed fair skin was better than the wrinkled leathery look anointed by a brutal and unforgiving sun. She found it ironic that Florida, the sunniest of all states, ended up revealing itself as their home by the time she turned twelve.

Heather managed to pry only one eye open, using it to watch her little sister walk out of the bedroom. Jade was dressed in a silky nightgown and matching maternity robe. Her hair had been thrown into a loose ponytail and her swollen belly was all that gave away her pregnancy. From behind, she looked as thin as a model and from the front she had the glow of an angel.

Jade walked into the kitchen and flipped the switch. Light illuminated the room and Heather felt comforted by the sounds of water running and cabinet doors being opened and closed. She wanted to believe her sister was measuring out and preparing to brew a huge pot of coffee.

"Coffee?" Heather called out weakly.

Her voice sounded hoarse as her vocal chords hadn't awakened at the same time as the one eye and the caffeine craving. She hoped she sounded pathetic enough that Jade took pity on

her decaffeinated soul.

“Are you planning to bring your guest a cup of hot coffee as soon as possible?” she asked.

Jade nodded and smiled.

Heather wriggled and groaned under the sheets as she considered bitching about the first thing that came to mind. She wasn't a morning person and she wasn't one to stifle her annoyances. She reminded herself of her vow to become more pleasant and closed her mouth before the first complaint flew out.

Jade had been sleeping in her bedroom the night before when she heard Heather's cries and groans from the living room. Stubbing her toe in the rush to save her sister from the unknown, she had been surprised to find her still asleep. She couldn't believe the sounds of agony that had come from whatever nightmare Heather was stuck inside of. As she watched her big sister fight an invisible enemy, Jade wondered what had disturbed Heather's life so much that she couldn't even find solace in her dreams.

Jade knew her sister had been seeing more of Dr. Angel over the last month. When she had asked her about it, Heather merely brushed it off. She had told Jade the doctor increased sessions from bi-weekly to weekly and offered nothing more. Heather was normally more forthcoming about her therapy so her lack of explanation told Jade she was withholding something.

Jade invited her sister to spend the night but not because she felt hormonal and violent as she had claimed upon the invitation. She knew Heather wouldn't have stayed if she didn't exaggerate her own fragile mental state because she hated to be away from her sons, especially overnight. Anxiety ravaged her sense of peace anytime she wasn't within a solidly protective distance of her boys.

“Do you know why you have my good sheets on you?” Jade asked as she flipped the power switch on the coffeepot, knowing her sister would come to life when the coffee grinds did.

The first sounds of percolation gave Heather the incentive to sit up, albeit in seemingly slow motion. Her morning grouchiness was well-known and most of her family made a habit of keeping their distance until she'd thrown back at least two cups of coffee.

“I was wondering that myself,” Heather said looking down at the sheets that engulfed her. “Did I wet the bed?”

“Why would I put my special sheets over you if you were soaked with urine?”

Jade shot her sister a look that said she was brain dead again and she pulled a half gallon of milk from the refrigerator.

Heather forcefully separated herself from the sofa and dragged her feet dramatically all the way to the kitchen. The sound of her slippers dragging across the floor sounded as pathetic and lethargic as she assumed she looked.

“ 'Cause you're stupid,” Heather answered, still working on opening her other eye. It was

the only comeback she could think of so early in the day.

Heather helped herself to a coffee mug from Jade's cabinet. She'd managed to pry the other eye open but both were still halfway closed. Twice, she had to brace herself to prevent herself from sliding around the tiled kitchen floor.

"Slippers and clean floors, bad combination," Heather mumbled.

"What would you know about clean floors?" Jade teased.

Heather smiled. Her lack of attention to such a mundane task as floor cleaning was no secret to anyone who had known her for more than a day.

Though it hadn't finished brewing, Heather quickly removed the coffee pot from its spot and instead held her cup under the hot drip. She shot her sister a sideways glance to make sure she wasn't watching. She was, as usual.

"You are so impatient," Jade told her.

"I'm not impatient. It's just that I want everything right now."

Heather grinned and took a painfully hot sip of coffee.

"Are you going to see Dr. Mind-screw today?" Jade asked.

Heather tried to exude nonchalance but knew her sister could see right through her.

"Yeah, I guess." Heather answered.

She didn't look at Jade when she answered and she didn't mime her words. Her most telling sign of distress was when she failed to choreograph while she spoke.

"What are you guys talking about lately anyway?" Jade attempted.

"Anything I should know about?"

Jade rarely intruded upon her sister's sessions but only because she never had to. Heather was always quick to praise the brilliance of her psychiatrist or to disclose the juicy secrets she shared with him. Lately though, she had become both protective and private about her appointments.

"How long have you been seeing him now anyway?" Jade asked.

Jade wasn't finished investigating. She wanted information.

Heather closed her eyes and hoped an onslaught of questions wasn't headed her way.

"I guess it's been about ten years," she replied.

Heather had lost a baby girl after a premature birth took her away too early and had found Dr. Angel after discovering she was unable to suffer the loss alone. Her child had been born too tiny to even put up the weakest of fights and Heather had come to admit her spirits had been irreparably destroyed. Counseling and heavy duty medication had been her last hope and finding Dr. Angel had probably saved her life.

She had only been looking for the quick fix needed to mentally and emotionally face the world again. She'd never have guessed an abyss of secrets waited to reveal themselves, leading to a decade of intensive psychotherapy.

"What do you guys talk about anymore?" Jade persisted.

"God," Heather joked.

She didn't want her pregnant sister worrying about the panic attack that had sent her careening down the rainy highway a week before.

"Really," Jade answered slowly.

She smiled, knowing Heather wouldn't waste time or money talking to anyone about religion.

"Why don't you guys try to figure out why a loving and all-knowing deity would create a place like Hell? Jade asked. "I never understood that one."

Jade's sarcasm lived in the resentment both sisters still nurtured as a result of the religious hypocrisy and illogical teachings of their youth. Heather dragged her slippers back across the wooden floor, this time with a steaming cup of coffee in hand. She eased herself back into the soft cushions and pulled her legs into an Indian -style position.

"He didn't," Heather finally responded.

"Who didn't what?" Jade asked and Heather rolled her eyes at her sister's poor memory span.

"God. He didn't create Hell. I think Hell created Him."

"Oh, boy," replied Jade.

The pregnant sister found her own snug position among the pillows. She had difficulty getting comfortable with the massive lump that had taken over her perfectly flat tummy and promised to never take fluid movement for granted again.

"Well, God existed all by Himself once, right? Maybe He knows how He got here and maybe He doesn't but at one point, He was completely alone. And He had total awareness but nobody to share it with. That sounds like the definition of Hell to me."

"You just created an entire religion in one sentence," Jade said.

Nothing that came out of Heather's mouth really surprised Jade anymore because Heather had been spewing strange theories since she was a baby.

"I'm serious. In a position like that, wouldn't you want to create a world to share with other people?" Heather persisted.

Although Heather had asked a question, she continued talking without waiting for a response.

"You wouldn't equip your creations with awareness because it would defeat the purpose. I mean, if they knew all the answers, there wouldn't be such a thing as faith, right? And isn't

faith crucial to our spirit? Anyway, that's how I would do it. I wouldn't let them know that time was endless and I'd find a way to live among them by making myself a part of each of them. That's really what the soul is, see? It's the part of each one of us that is actually God."

"What would be the point of all that?" Jade asked.

"To live out a life that had purpose instead of just being the puppet master. Maybe he wanted to know happiness and love, not just through observation but from experience."

Heather shrugged and continued.

"Maybe after He created the world, He discovered there was one thing He had no control of." Heather paused for effect and raised her eyebrows at her sister.

Jade glanced at the clock on her monitor. "It's way too early for this shit."

"Don't you want to know what it was?" Heather pressed.

She offered puppy dog eyes and a pout and when Jade still didn't show interest, started panting like a dog.

"Okay, okay," Jade laughed. "What?"

"Evil. Maybe He didn't account for the evil that existed," Heather said.

"Wouldn't He have the power to just destroy the evil?"

"Not with free will," Heather countered.

"Maybe there is no free will and that's just a crock of shit people want to believe so they don't have to admit an invisible man in the sky can't answer all their prayers," Jade replied.

Heather scowled at her sister, pulled the sweat pants off and threw them into a ball in the corner. As close as they were, the sisters still had certain modesties in front of each other and she made a hand gesture to signify the necessary eye closure before pulling on black lacy t-backs and tugging the jeans above her hips.

"Okay, open," Heather commanded.

Jade opened her eyes and made a face when a tiny foot caught itself in one of her ribs. She clutched at her rib cage and forced herself to breathe steadily.

"Yeah, I don't miss that part," Heather said.

She walked over to the chair Jade had plopped herself into and gently placed a hand on her sister's bulging belly.

"Be nice to your mommy," she whispered to her unborn nephew.

Heather stood and started pacing Jade's living room floor. She picked up the last conversation without any preamble. She planned to share her theories whether Jade was interested or not because she refused to suffer her weird thoughts alone.

"Maybe He made Adam and Eve, expecting all would go well," Heather said.

Heather buttoned her jeans and remained quiet until she was nestled snugly into a cotton T-shirt. When she continued, her voice took on the tone of the wicked witch of the west.

“But an evil form came into existence and said ‘Here, my pretty. Eat the apple.’ ”

“Please don’t jump from Heaven to Hell to Oz, Heather. You’re confusing enough,” she sighed.

“Sorry,” Heather laughed. “The point is, maybe the devil screwed up God’s plan when he lured His own creations away from Him. And maybe God got mad after He created man only to be betrayed for a snake. Men suck and they’re cheaters and I can totally relate to God’s disgust with them.”

“I think by man He means all of mankind, stupid. Wasn’t it Eve who ate the damn apple?”

If anyone else had called her stupid, Heather would have been pissed off but when Jade said it, it made her laugh.

“Sure, she ate the apple but so did Adam,” Heather answered. “And who talked her into it?”

“She did it on her own, Heather. You just hate men and you’re bitter because you married two assholes.”

“I don’t hate men. I love men. And those two assholes are my friends. Whose side are you on, anyway?” Heather asked.

“Between who and who? I don’t even know what you’re talking about anymore,” Jade giggled.

“Me either. I stopped listening a little while ago.” Heather grinned. “I was kind of hoping you’d explain it to me.”

Jade dropped her head dramatically against the back of the couch and remained quiet. She just stared at her sister from her new position. She couldn’t believe her eyes as she watched Heather drop her good sheets to the floor. They fell into a heap atop the pile of clutter she had already collected in the corner of the hallway.

Jade tried not to laugh when Heather, noticing the look of displeasure on her sister’s face, picked the sheets up from the floor while innocently whistling. She started folding them as though that had been her plan all along.

“Anyway,” Heather continued. “Maybe God’s pissed at us.”

Just as quickly, she wished the thought had never occurred to her.

“Why would He be mad at us? We weren’t there,” Jade snapped defensively. “If it were Adam and Eve who screwed up, why punish us?”

They had been raised in a home where Christianity was a demand instead of a choice. The Baptist religion had been given more attention than God and the memories alone caused instinctual cringing in both of them.

They had each grown up to become master manipulators and Heather knew a connection existed. The conflict and confusion religion had created for them caused subsequent problems and self-appointed preachers still made them want to break glass.

“Maybe Adam and Eve only represented what we were all going to become – liars, cheaters, manipulators,” Heather said.

“Is that really how you see the world?” Jade asked frowning.

“Yes,” Heather answered without hesitation.

“God doesn’t fail, Heather. Even if He did, He would have had the power to wipe it away and start all over again.”

“Maybe He didn’t see it as a failure,” Heather mused. “Maybe He finally had a nemesis and He liked the challenge. It’s not as lonely.”

“What are you saying? He started a war between good and evil because He was bored?”

“Well, why not?” Heather smirked but she couldn’t have been more serious.

“Why would someone so good invite evil into the world?” Jade asked.

“Maybe He found out that good isn’t good until it’s compared to bad,” Heather said.

Jade didn’t try to hide her shocked expression.

“Are you insane?”

Heather feigned a hurt look.

“Yeah, so?”

“Just because you prefer chaos to peace and normalcy, it doesn’t mean everyone does. God’s a little more omnipotent than that, don’t you think?” Jade asked.

“Do you even know what omnipotent means?” Heather inquired with a knowing smirk.

“Of course I do,” Jade blushed. “Anyway, I need to get a shower.”

“Define omnipotent,” Heather pressed.

“What? No. If you don’t know what it means, I can’t help you.”

Jade knew she was busted in her fib but wouldn’t admit it out loud at any cost. She just smiled and bowed her head sheepishly as she picked up a half-eaten jar of Gerber pears from the table. After receiving a case of baby food at her shower the previous month, the pregnant sister had made a point to taste one per day. Heather guessed the food would be long gone before Jade’s infant made it past breast-feeding.

“Shut up,” Jade finally answered and she flicked a spoonful of baby food into her sister’s hair.

Heather didn’t move and she cursed her own grin, which continued to widen despite her

commands not to. She was pissed off and amused at the same time and flinched at the weird combination of feelings.

She was finished with the conversation anyway. Other concerns were stealing her attention and she didn't have any more time for religion. She knew right from wrong and she knew her own soul better than anyone. There was no book or collective idea that would add to or detract from who she was. Looking back at her upbringing, she felt pity over how brainwashed some of her family members had been.

Heather rose from the couch and gently placed her coffee mug on the table. She hadn't yet responded to her sister's baby food assault and her lack of reaction was causing Jade more anxiety. Knowing how effective her silence was, Heather played it to the fullest and smiled sweetly at her cringing sister. When Billy jumped into her thoughts without warning, Heather experienced the familiar guilt and lust that always came.

"What's the matter?" asked Jade as she watched the yellow slop drip from her sister's bangs. The sudden change in Heather's expression wasn't lost on her.

"Nothing," whispered Heather. She tried to force the glow back into her cheeks and the fun back into her voice but just wound up sounding insane.

"Can I have a towel please? I decided to take a shower here instead of at home." She didn't add she suddenly felt very dirty.

"Sure," Jade answered. She tried to keep the frown from her eyebrows when she heard Heather's shaky voice and noticed her change in posture.

Heather told herself that withholding and lying were completely different animals and she pushed the creeping stress away. She had sibling revenge to tend to and needed to concentrate on the here and now. She could deal with the shame when it grew from a seed into an unavoidable pink elephant in the room.

Heather put a towel to her hair and smeared the remaining glob of baby food into it. Rather than folding it and rolling it into a ball for the laundry, she slapped the wettest part of it into Jade's forehead.

Her sister giggled and threw the offending towel on the floor.

"Touché," Jade said.

Heather walked down the hall toward the bathroom. She couldn't fight the urge to focus on thoughts of Billy and her heartbeat sped up at the realization she would see him soon.

All of her thoughts were knocked out completely when a sudden weight to the back of her head forced Heather to slam face first into the wall. Her little sister had thrown the towel at her and Heather would have placed a bet that it had been seeped in more baby food before being fashioned into Jade's weapon of choice.

"Oh! God, I'm sorry," Jade said from behind. The obviously fake apology oozed from her lips.

Heather shot her a bird and smiled sweetly before kicking the bathroom door shut in Jade's laughing face.

After showering and dressing in blue cotton pajama pants and a tank top, Heather decided she would grab a cup of coffee at the bookstore. She had no inhibitions about wearing her pajamas outside, always believing that if more people wore their jammies in public, the world would be a better place.

She stared into her eyes in the bathroom mirror. Straining to see herself at the deepest level possible, she tried to send herself a telepathic message.

"Say no today," she whispered.

Heather knew that planning didn't matter when it came to Billy. No matter how she tried to prepare herself to do the right thing, something always thwarted plans made in good conscience. Usually, it was Billy himself who undid her efforts to end the affair.

The thought of him snapped her eyes open. She tried to block out his image but failed miserably.

"Whore," she hissed at her reflection.

Billy's early morning phone call had rattled her. She hadn't meant to tell him to come over but it somehow came out that way. He planned to be at her house in two hours and she couldn't call him back to tell him she'd changed her mind.

It was one of the drawbacks of carrying on a secret relationship with a married man. Access to him was never free and never without some sort of danger attached. Heather supposed that was part of the draw for both of them. Because of her restricted access to his life, Heather had never armed herself with his contact information. Even in a life or death emergency, she wouldn't be able to call her lover and let him know what had happened.

Contact always came from his side. Heather was simply in charge of the decision on whether to answer his private calls or not. It was the pattern of their entire relationship for the past eight years.

Before those eight years of marriage, they had spent six years partying. Their powerful union had flourished in the company of friends who played in a rock n' roll band. Both Heather and Billy looked back on their time spent with the band as their most normal and their most happy. Once there were husbands and wives to concern themselves with, their gratification came from a different place entirely.

Jade knew about Billy. She had, in fact, been the only one in Heather's life who had actually met him. Their interactions had taken place during the old party days and had left a bad taste in her sister's mouth.

After watching Billy comfortably walk the floors of the club she worked in, carelessly sniffing cocaine from a bag he held, Jade had gone off on him. He had laughingly apologized and Jade warned her he was bad news. Heather wondered how her life would have gone if she'd actually heeded her sister's advice.

Heather hadn't spoken of him for awhile. She refused to tarnish her sister's view of her anymore than she already had. For all Jade knew, she had finally found a way to end the sick relationship. Heather could still hear her mother's voice clearly.

"You're the big sister; show a good example!"

Heather squeezed Jade tightly and kissed the top of her head. Her shampoo had a fruity scent and Heather inhaled it throughout the entire hug. She gently patted the bump that was to become her nephew and smiled at the thought of Jade becoming a mom. Her sister would finally understand the love one couldn't experience until looking into the eyes of her own child.

"I love you," she told her sister

"I love you too," Jade answered.

Chapter 2

Witchy Woman

Smart and independent somehow didn't equate to common sense in Heather's life. She realized too often that she was hopeless when it came to paying attention to details. She was always so busy assessing the depth of everything around her that she usually missed what was in front of her. Shaking her head at the keyboard, she asked herself why.

"Why would I touch the keys with greasy hands?" she mumbled.

It was a question she asked herself at least three times a day.

Her greatest trigger for an internal argument was when she lost her keys or spilled something on herself. Each day, she pitched at least one fit after losing something important or making an unnecessary mess.

Heather tried to look away from the keyboard but her conscience forced her eyes back. The keys were wet and shiny and the mouse pad had a grease stain in the shape of a finger.

She looked at the remnants sitting on the table beside her and made a face at them. The sandwich was the source of the grease and she immediately shifted blame to the clerk who sold it to her. He had suggested the hot Italian sub and she had ordered the largest one they made. He should have told her it would be so greasy. Heather went to the counter for napkins and returned with an apple pie instead.

She dropped the pie onto her table and started collecting the trash she had accumulated when she noticed a man staring at her. He sat in the corner, easily noticeable by his blond scraggly hair. She could tell he was incredibly tall from his sitting position and she sensed he felt out of place in the bookstore. Heather offered a small smile in response to his stare. He returned the grin and waved with one hand.

Deciding her horizons had been broadened enough, she decided to go home and take a nap. Heading home had nothing to do with Billy, she told herself. If he came over, she wouldn't let him in anyway. She reminded herself that if she felt her resolve weaken, she could just envision his wife.

Heather had never seen her but had long ago created an image of her. In her mind, Billy's wife had long dark hair and deep brown eyes. Her complexion was perfect and her body was both fit and curvy. In Heather's reluctant thoughts, the wife is always crying because she's just discovered her husband is a cheating bastard.

Heather closed her eyes to block out the thought of the woman whose life she had ruined. The fact the poor woman didn't even know about the destruction was the worst part. Billy's wife thought she was married to the greatest man alive and lived in complete ignorance of his secret life.

Heather justified the relationship for a long time but found she could no longer ignore the

feeling the affair was somehow damaging her soul. She had begun to lose interest in the things that had always given her pleasure and she knew from experience that was a sign of trouble.

Boredom had always been Heather's most dangerous enemy. It was when she lost interest in everything else that she began to seek out the chaos. Boredom led to compulsions and compulsions led to passionate reunions with old lovers or dangerous new meetings with strangers. Other times, she hid snugly inside a bottle of pain pills. Either way, whenever she got to the point of desperation, she stopped following the laws and rules that usually governed her.

The phone rang and Heather couldn't grab it fast enough.

The caller had marked the call private. That meant it was either the Attorney General's office or it was Billy. She hoped shamelessly it was the latter.

"Hello?" she asked slowly.

Her eyes landed on the clock and it read 11:11. The coincidence amused her, as usual. The number came up so often she had included it in her license plate.

"Hey, baby."

Heather always had the same reaction hearing his voice. She was consumed with excitement, frustration and shame but the drama always provided a great diversion from her internal anxieties so she had allowed it in her life. At least, she had until recently.

"Hey," she responded.

She felt like a goofy school girl and cursed herself for allowing him to have such an effect on her. Her relationship with Billy existed on a different level altogether, one she couldn't explain to even herself.

"Are you ready for me?" he teased.

She could hear the sex dripping from his voice and her libido hit the speed it needed to turn itself on. Heather told herself to be firm and clear with him. She would tell him not to come.

"Always," she answered instead. A soft whimper of shame escaped her throat.

"I'm on my way," he said.

"Okay, but I have court at 1:00," she rushed.

"That's okay," he said and it sounded like he was already doing things to himself. "We still have an hour."

Heather could feel his smile, it was so loud. She could also sense the satisfaction and smugness coming from the other end of the receiver.

"All right, well," she flubbed.

She couldn't understand why Billy found her to be such a seductive force in his life when

she was still so clumsy and speechless around him.

"I'm on Bloomer Street right now," he said.

Heather didn't understand why the imagery was so important to him but she usually played along after some prodding. She could picture Billy in his black truck driving down Bloomer Street with an erection growing by the mile and the thought made her excited.

When he got to her house he would do the same thing with their lovemaking. He'd bring her into the kitchen and screw her on the counter.

"Remember this when you're cooking tonight," he'd tell her.

He would bring her into the bathroom and bend her over in front of the mirror so they could watch themselves. The image would be burned into her memory and every time she brushed her teeth or plucked her eyebrows, her internal video camera replayed the scene back for her.

"I'm on Gunn," he said in a half whisper.

"Are you wearing your red bandana?" she asked.

He knew she loved it when he wore the red head rag and he did anything she wanted, as long as it remained a part of the secret life they shared.

"Of course," he said. She could hear the smile in his voice.

"All right, I'm hanging up," she said. "I have to get ready."

"What for?" he asked.

Heather reminded herself that men didn't know what went on behind the scenes. He didn't know she would be lighting candles and preparing a music list. He had no idea she'd be checking to make sure she was perfectly shaved or that her skin smelled sweet enough.

He wouldn't see her running from one room to the next, ensuring each room was clean in case they decided to venture into it. And he wouldn't see the shame and the guilt she struggled with after images of crying brown eyes forced their way into her awareness.

Billy had always promised that when she was ready, he would let her go but he had proven himself to be a liar. She had tried repeatedly to end the relationship but he called persistently and somehow knew all the right words to weaken her resolve.

There were many unspoken agreements between them. Heather often told herself she loved the secret and the excitement but not the man. She'd never admit it but she figured deep down she had to have some kind of love for him. Otherwise, she couldn't have compromised her values and morals for so long.

She had no envy for his wife or for the life the woman led but decided there might be some residual ache leftover from the fact that Billy had chosen another woman to marry years before. Besides, it was the wife who had gotten the raw end of the deal. It was the wife who was being cheated and lied to. Heather told herself she felt no envy for the deceived spouse who lived in ignorance. So what if she got to hold him every night and wake up to

him each morning. Heather told herself she didn't care about those things.

The invisible rules erected by the taboo couple were never discussed openly. They both knew which boundaries they could cross and which ones they couldn't.

Lately, Billy had been breaking the rules by showing up at Heather's place unannounced or by calling on weekends rather than sticking to their safe, weekly schedule.

She thought how strange it was that they had known each other for so long but didn't know one another at all. That fact had actually been the selling point of the relationship. Neither one would ever have to be at the end of a nagging session or have to argue about things like bills or parenting. He knew her work schedule, her menstrual cycle and he knew how to make her come but he knew nothing about who she really was.

Heather had begun experiencing guilt she couldn't continue to ignore. Knowing her lover went home to a woman who thought he was faithful sickened her. Knowing she was the other woman made Heather hate herself.

Heather began lighting the candles in her bedroom. She was relieved when the rain began falling outside her window. Stormy weather was her favorite and its presence would add to the ambience of the bi-weekly ritual. She pretended the rain would wash away the sins she was about to commit.

Heather quickly scanned each room and walked into the bathroom to pull the shower curtain closed. As she passed the large round bathroom mirror, she caught her own stare and stopped abruptly.

Don't do it. Don't even answer the door.

She saw the plea in her own eyes but she ignored it. She told herself it would be their last time together.

Heather walked into the kitchen and grabbed a box of cigarettes from the kitchen drawer. She always smoked one when Billy was on his way over and one when Billy was on his way out the door. He wasn't a smoker but he always shared the second one with her.

Heather stood just outside the front door so the smoke wouldn't go inside the house. She tried to duck away from any possible neighbor sightings as she wore only a sheer silk nightgown. She didn't think calling attention to herself was the best idea. The last thing she wanted to do was create anymore potentially pissed off wives. Heather took a drag off the cigarette and thought about the first time she had seen Billy.

She was in her early twenties and was hanging out in a small rock n' roll club when she saw him walk in. She nudged her friend's arm and discreetly pointed at him.

"He will be mine," Heather had said confidently.

"Okay, let's go meet him," Ruth responded without hesitation.

Ruth had been her best friend in high school. By the time they hit their mid-twenties, their friendship had already gotten lost in their different choices. Ruth eventually moved away

but Heather would always look back on their friendship with nothing but appreciation.

“No! Don’t you dare!” Heather warned.

She had scolded herself. She should have known better. Sharing a secret with Ruth was like writing it on a bathroom wall.

“What? You just said . . .,” Ruth started but Heather cut her off by placing a hand over her friend’s mouth. She remembered hoping Ruth would oblige and let it go. Instead, she had grabbed Heather’s hand and started walking toward him.

His long dark hair was typical for the early ’90s in which they lived. He was tall and he had a nice build and a handsome face. Heather knew immediately he would become an important part of her life. She felt as though, subconsciously, she had always been aware he would show up one day. It was like she had seen a movie of her life as a child and remembered clearly he had been in several scenes. Upon seeing him, Heather’s first thought had been, “*There he is. It’s about time.*”

Ruth walked directly to the other guy, whom they later learned was his brother.

“Is this chair being used?” Ruth asked the brother.

“No, no, go ahead,” he had answered, undoubtedly believing she needed it for her own table.

“Thanks,” she answered and sat down. She scooted the chair in and poured herself a beer from their pitcher. Heather was stunned by her friend’s balls and tried desperately to keep a straight face.

“Hey, I’m Ruth,” she said. Heather had prayed silently her friend wouldn’t tell him what she’d said.

Ruth turned her attention to Billy and continued.

“And this is my friend Heather. She says you will be hers.”

Ruth had winked at her and then grabbed a French fry from the basket in front of her. Reddened with mortification, Heather had taken the seat Billy offered her. Despite her embarrassment, her instincts had continued tingling and the familiarity of his presence made the moment surreal.

“Sit down,” he said smiling.

She did sit down. She had also followed him out of the bar a short time later and drove with him into a secluded area of the nearby woods. They had their first encounter on top of his jeep and the experience had been powerful. They had no idea their future was carving itself out silently amidst the night chirps of hidden animals and the shameful eye of morality. Eventually, they saw each other through two husbands, one wife and four sons, none of whom they had made together.

Heather needed to find a way out of Billy’s world before God judged her too harshly and she landed in the pits of Hell. She had told Billy repeatedly he wasn’t worth her eternity and

that he wasn't worth her guilt, but he persisted and she weakened.

She took another drag of her Marlboro Light and then peeked out the blinds for the tenth time. When his truck finally came into view, she panicked.

Heather pulled herself back into the house. She never let him see her waiting for him. She always just opened the door with a smile and led him down the hall toward her bedroom. It was her safe haven and she barely even spoke to him until they got there.

She watched him park and noticed the bandana through his partially tinted window. He liked to call himself her sex slave. He didn't mean it literally as Heather usually accepted the submissive role but he would fulfill any fantasy or desire she had. She wondered for the length of his trek up the cobblestone walk if he would ever understand how much his presence in her life hurt her.

When he got to the door, he leered at her silky gown and his face took on a look of sick pleasure.

"Move it," he said with a smile. His eyes were even darker than usual.

"This is the last time," she said without budging.

She waited for a response and suddenly felt as though she were asking for permission to end the relationship. She didn't like the feeling. She had always called the shots in her relationships but when it came to Billy, she seemed to have no say at all.

His eyes darted around the neighborhood and she could tell his forced visibility in the public view was making him nervous. He smiled.

"Okay," he said.

He didn't mean it. He would have said anything for access inside.

She smiled and turned away from him. He stepped in, closing and locking the door behind him. She felt him close behind her as she walked down the hallway and his presence made her hair stand on end.

She stepped into her bedroom and turned to face him. Billy roughly grabbed her by the nape of her neck and he pressed his mouth to hers. He kissed her deeply as he put her arms behind her back. He held her wrists behind her with one hand and he caressed the side of her face with the other. When he spoke, his lips were almost touching hers.

"You don't want to leave me," he said softly.

Heather wondered if it were an innocent statement or if it were meant to be a threat; although her body continued to respond, she was angry throughout the rest of his visit.

She was angry during their time in the bedroom. She was even angrier when they were in the living room but she became the angriest when he tried to bring her into her youngest son's room. She knew he intended to violate her entire house and ruin every square inch for her. He backed himself into Jack's doorway first and tried pulling her in by her waist.

Heather stood her ground and held onto the door casing tightly. Billy put his hands around her hips and pulled. Although he managed to pull her legs into the room, Heather maintained her grip on the door ledge and refused to join him inside.

“No,” she said shaking her head back and forth.

Billy quickly changed tactics and forced her into a backwards walk through the living room, with one finger to her chest. She wasn't sure whether or not they were playing anymore and felt for the first time this may not just be a game to him after all.

He stopped in front of her bed and pushed her onto it with little force. Heather quickly backed up to the wall, trying to assess his facial expressions. She needed to determine whether she was at the other end of horseplay or if she were suddenly a candidate for rape. His expression told her not to resist and Heather knew it was safer to follow her instinct than it was to stand up to him just then.

She decided to play it more carefully and to start avoiding him no matter how much effort it took. She had just started to make a mental list of all the ways she could hide from him when he pulled her onto the mattress by her hair and forced her onto her back.

Heather managed to get her breathing under control. She started to tell him to stop but he put his hand over her mouth and signaled with a finger to the lip for her to stay quiet.

As usual, Heather closed her eyes and took the express to the numb place.

Chapter 3

Rage Against the Machine

Heather had a ten-mile drive ahead of her and only twenty minutes before her hearing was scheduled to start. She blamed Billy for the possibility she might be late for court. She had never been good at acknowledging accountability, especially if there were a man handy to blame. Thoughts of Billy continued to distract her and she turned up the volume on her car radio in an attempt to drown them out.

Heather was a social worker for the state child protection agency and her job required frequent court appearances. She often had to testify to the status of each case and with thirty kids on her caseload that meant she often faced conflicting hearings.

Heather usually saw the best qualities in the worst parent and her rapport with most of her families was strong. She worked many hours toward reunifying families after abuse and neglect separated them and was proud of her role in the process. At times, the responsibility for so many lives took a toll on her and left her fighting exhaustion, anger and confusion. She often felt trapped between her roles as representative of the state and champion for individual rights.

Her days were spent in the company of disparate groups of people. If she were a little less aware of herself, Heather could have easily convinced herself she suffered from multiple personality disorder. Two or three days a week, she found herself swimming in an ocean inhabited by attorneys, psychiatrists, judges and many other species of social workers. For the remainder of the week, she would be overcome by the poverty, bad parenting, threatening fathers and dirty children who all had a plea in their eyes. Too often, she felt ill-equipped to determine whether or not their sorrowful looks came from relief of pending danger or from fear of being removed from the only family they'd ever known.

Heather both loved and hated her job. She appreciated that her work drama was time-consuming and that it interfered with her need for personal crisis. She got paid to deal with tragedy all day and was able to return to a semi-normal home life. For Heather, there was never such thing as a normal life, or at least she'd never know because she had nothing to compare it to.

She hated the feeling of being late for court. If her hearing were called and she wasn't there to represent the state, the hearing was struck and reset. It meant trouble for Heather and it made her agency look bad. Worst of all, it threatened to impede cases which were already moving painfully slow. Though she often had to run from the parking garage to the fourth floor courtrooms, she rarely missed a hearing. Most of her colleagues had faith in her despite the fact her briefcase usually had paperwork caught in its zipper and her clothes didn't always match.

Heather was dressed in a baby blue business suit and her skirt fell just below her knees. The jacket she chose offset her bottom half with an aura of professionalism. When she

used to wear her badge, it added to the sensation of authority but she had lost it a year before and strangely, her agency still hadn't replaced it. She knew deep down her human resources department drew the line when she lost her fourth tag in as many years and she was adequately ashamed of herself.

Heather stumbled on her high heel and practically fell out of the car into the parking garage. She hated wearing heels but those shoes were the only ones she could find that morning.

Passing by the elevator, she shook her head at the line of the people waiting. She never opted for it because it was too small and she was already severely claustrophobic. Even on the days she was late she chose the stairs. She usually ran them so fast that she'd end up on the bottom floor before the elevator did anyway.

Heather's success came not from speed or precision but more from her passion and creativity amidst chaos. Heather lived most moments of her life in a rush, as though every event were an emergency but she'd found a way to turn the bad habit into a positive work attribute.

She ran through the downtown streets and wondered if she subconsciously made herself late for everything. In therapy, she had discovered she often threw hurdles in her own way as a diversion to her thoughts and feelings. She was trying to teach herself how to live life from the inside. It was a dark and scary place with many secrets but something told her it was time for a visit.

Heather couldn't hide her desires any better than she could hide her expressions. Her passions usually floated to the surface and waved proudly to the world whether she wanted them to or not. She had never been accused of having an excess of willpower but had often been accused of being too controlling. Heather was the first to admit she tried to maintain control over the people and events in her life. She didn't feel guilty about it because she never abused her position in people's lives. On the contrary, she had always used the need for control to take care of them. At least, she thought she had.

The morning docket was before Judge Oliva and Heather's case involved a father who took good care of his children but had lost them to the state anyway. After the mother overdosed on pills in a thwarted suicide attempt, the child protection unit presented themselves to the hard-working, single dad of two and removed his children because of marijuana in his system. They were placed in foster homes where they suffered the first abuse of their lives by adults who didn't have even a shred of attachment to them. Heather had come to court to recommend the reunification of the father with his ten-year-old son and four-year-old daughter.

Heather held Judge Oliva personally responsible for the abuse of the children since she had been the one to order the removal of the two children. The judge hadn't wanted to hear the facts Heather had brought to her and wasn't interested in proof the father was a good parent. The fact that he was their only source of emotional support, as well as their biggest protector, was of no consequence to her. All she heard when they stood in front of her seven months before was mention of drugs and it had been over for the Bradley family.

Heather didn't find it appropriate that the judge's decisions were born from her Christian and political views. She wasn't the only caseworker to believe the overbearing hag should have stepped down long before. With contempt already making its way through Heather's veins, she looked up at the bitch in her black robe and tried to soothe the knot of anger in her chest before her case was called.

She wasn't as afraid of the judge as she was at the idea of losing control in front of the judge. Heather also suspected the woman came down harder on her because she'd found out about her arrest record. In the absence of the truth and valid facts, the woman had undoubtedly passed final judgment on Heather and she seemed to take it out on the families she brought before her.

The attorney sitting next to Heather stood up when his case was called and she noticed Lucas, the communications liaison for her agency and the judge, sitting quietly on the same bench. As usual, he wore pants that had never known a wrinkle and his perpetual laptop sat atop his knees. Heather wondered if she would even recognize him if his computer weren't attached to him like an appendage.

Her favorite part of Lucas was his sarcasm. He was quick-witted and he offered shock value she always appreciated but rarely got to be the recipient of. He presented himself both professionally and as a man of honor. Since she found him attractive, Heather knew his nobility had to be a front.

His eyes were icy blue and his dark hair had a perfect little wave, like a lead singer might don in a fifties rock band. Lucas smiled at her and then returned his gaze to the monitor in front of him.

"Where have you been?" he whispered.

"In front of my judgy wudge," she whispered back.

Lucas smiled. Everyone knew Heather was partial to Judge Alvarez who presided over a different division. She really hadn't made an effort to hide it. Despite the fact that her favorite judge had ruled against her in a sensitive sexual abuse case, she still looked up at him with a starstruck and goofy gaze.

Judge Alvarez was a brilliant man. His place atop the pedestal was well deserved and he decorated it with stuffed animals so he could offer one to each child he came into contact with. She knew her own experience in such a dismal and maddening world was intense and was well aware the judge's experiences far exceeded her own. She trusted that his decisions never came from a self-serving or selfish place. His heart was as open as his decisions were fair and Heather felt honored each time she had the good fortune to bring a case before him.

Lucas kept his eyes on the computer and Heather kept at least one eye on her not-so-favorite judge. The last thing she needed was to be made an example of for whispering in the back.

"Scared?" Lucas asked teasingly. He knew how she felt about his boss and he seemed to find it amusing.

“No,” Heather lied.

The parents in the case were usually present at the hearing but the Bradleys lived out of state and would be present via the telephone.

“Man, she hates you.” Lucas grinned and looked Heather directly in the eyes, obviously waiting for a response.

“Thanks,” she said. At least his insensitive confirmation worked to dispel her paranoia.

She looked down at Lucas’ pants and thought about how put together he always was. She wondered what organization felt like as she sometimes had trouble not dressing backwards.

“Bradley!” The bailiff screamed.

“Shit,” Heather said, louder than planned.

She headed to the seat reserved for her beside her waiting attorney and worked hard to maintain an aura of professionalism as she quietly unclasped the latches on her briefcase. She pulled out a tattered folder filled with partially torn documents and reminded herself that her preparations wouldn’t matter in front of Judge Oliva. She leaned in to her attorney and whispered.

“Is she in a bad mood?” Heather asked her attorney.

Cindy wasn’t only a sharply dressed and successful attorney. She was absolutely beautiful. What she couldn’t win with her mesmerizing arguments, the woman could with her perfect features. Cindy’s ability to integrate beauty and brains into such an approachable person was a rarity and Heather used the lawyer’s image as a measure to fight her own aging anxieties. If she could be half of what Cindy was by the time she hit forty-four, Heather would stop worrying about aging entirely.

“Just don’t push anything, Heather. Please,” Cindy pleaded.

The attorney had been exposed to her client’s sensitive cases in the past and knew that Judge Oliva tended to unravel in Heather’s liberal presence.

Heather gave a hurt look and shrugged innocently.

“What do you mean?” Heather whispered, offering a pathetic shrug.

She jumped when Judge Oliva’s voice spilled loudly from the microphone sitting in front of her.

“Announcements!” she yelled louder than necessary. Everyone sitting at the table provided their name and title to the court. As Heather listened to the attorneys, the guardian ad litem representatives and the supervisors explain their roles, she fought the sudden need to giggle and had to make efforts to refrain from crossing her eyes at them. Teasing was her juvenile gesture of admiration and it came from the desire to help her colleagues out of the mundane world they were stuck in, if only for a short moment.

Heather was familiar with most of the attorneys in the circle and was still surprised at how much she had grown to like them. She had found many of the lawyers shared her same perceptions and same sense of humor. Court was her only opportunity to commune with them and their presence made appearances more enjoyable.

Heather forced her attention toward the judge and listened as the woman directed a question to the telephone sitting beside her.

“Sir, can you hear me?” she asked whoever was at the other end.

The microphone squawked and everyone instinctively grabbed their ears. Heather thought about how her client always seemed to attract bad luck.

“Yes, ma’am,” said the capable father.

“I’m here.”

James Bradley had a southern accent that couldn’t be missed. He also had an anger problem when confronted by authority and he detested the system. Bitterness was a common feeling among her clients but James just couldn’t hide it as well as the rest and Heather worried about what he might say.

She fought the instinct to prevent an impending argument and reminded herself that her constant coddling of her clients served her well only at hearings. It didn’t enable them to do important things on their own so she often had to fight the need to fix their problems. Her nurturing nature gave them the chance to deflect accountability and it made her feel like a phony when she stood up to represent the state.

There was constant conflict between what was best for the children and what she was legally allowed to do. That’s why the Bradley case bothered her even more. It was clear to everyone involved that nothing was endangering the children except for the beliefs and decisions made by the judge.

It was unjust that the father was even involved. Every hearing he attended and every class the state forced him into only took him away from his kids. The constant time away from work threatened his job and he needed it to continue to support them. Heather feared one day Florida would become a police state where a sudden knock at the door could be government officials coming to remove a child because a curse word was uttered. She agreed that the dad’s habitual pot smoking wasn’t in the best interest of the Bradley children but the alternatives had proven far worse and nobody else wanted to admit it.

Judge Oliva summarized the case for the court and began the proceedings by facing Cindy.

“You may begin,” she said to Heather’s attorney. The judge looked sternly down at all of them and Heather realized the bitch had found herself the only job where she could literally look down at everyone.

Cindy turned to face Heather and she began to ask the usual questions.

“Are you the care manager for this case?”

“Yes, I am,” Heather replied confidently.

“Are you familiar with this case?” Cindy asked. “Yes, I am.”

“Is the father compliant with his case plan tasks at this time?”

Heather usually directed her eye contact toward the judge but she always glanced over at her compliant clients with an eye wink of support. James was too far away to notice the gesture so she sent him support telepathically.

“He’s completed a substance abuse program, has stable finances and housing, and has been compliant with drug screens.”

“Are his drug screens clean?”

“He had five positive screens as the marijuana worked its way out of his system. Then he came up negative.”

Heather reminded herself that withholding and lying weren’t the same thing and she prayed that the judge wouldn’t ask for specifics.

“And his screens have been negative ever since?” she asked.

Shit, shit, shit.

“No, Your Honor, they haven’t. Each of the two screens after that were positive again.”

The judge’s expression turned to one of shock and horror. Heather had no doubt that the old hag practiced the look in the mirror for moments such as this. She knew she was in trouble and wanted desperately to yell out the truth to everyone listening. She wanted to tell them that the court was turning a good man into a criminal and that they had been forced to send the children to homes where no bond existed.

Judge Oliva held so tightly to her own self-imposed values that she never saw the big picture or the negative affect she had on so many lives. Heather considered she just might hate the woman and struggled to maintain control of her voice and her movements.

The judge leaned forward and made eye contact that was so intense Heather thought her heart might stop beating. An eye twitch took hold and she fought to keep it under control.

“Do you and your agency find a problem with your clients using drugs?” she asked calmly.

The judge was using her most condescending tone and Heather looked at Cindy with raised eyebrows. The gesture was a friendly warning that Heather felt her control slipping away. She began to seriously wonder how long a jail stint was for contempt of court.

Heather started to speak and her tone picked up more confidence after she realized her vocal chords were on alert and wouldn’t fail her.

“We’re very serious about drug use, Your Honor. However, this man takes very good care of his children and he only came to our attention because the mother, and primary custodian at the time, overdosed and was Baker-acted into a psychiatric hospital. We just

want to allow Dad to maintain custody of his kids while he's completing his tasks.”

Heather just wanted the little girl and boy safely home with their dad. She glanced at the phone and wondered what kind of expression the father was wearing at that moment.

She looked over at the judge and realized the woman was still staring down at her. By the expression on her face, it was obvious the judge hadn't heard a word she said. All that penetrated her hearing was that Dad had a positive drug screen. Heather wondered if she experienced other people's words like the parents in a Charlie Brown episode or if she just blocked them out altogether. Either way, it was obvious the hearing would not go the way Heather had hoped. The judge wouldn't allow her mind to accept other concepts. It would be difficult for her to hold onto her conservative beliefs. Heather felt her fists tighten as they hung beside her thighs.

The judge began to speak in a slow tone, as if addressing a child or a mentally challenged person.

“Do you believe that it's all right to raise your children while you're smoking weed just because you're functionally well?”

Heather was stunned by the question. It was a personal one and Heather only stood before the court to represent her agency and their views, not her own. She wasn't sure how to respond and she looked to Cindy for support.

“We . . . ,” she began but was cut off by the judge.

“No, no. I asked this question of you,” Oliva said, obviously annoyed. “I'll ask you again. Do you believe it's okay to smoke weed and raise your kids just because you're functioning well?”

Heather looked at Cindy again and the lawyer nodded. She wanted Heather to answer the question.

“Yes, I do,” Heather answered firmly.

She couldn't believe it came out of her own mouth and was as shocked as the rest of the courtroom. Heather glanced over at Lucas and saw that he wore a bigger smile than she had ever seen on him. She thought it was a shame she would never see him again.

The judge raised one brow and spoke.

“Oh, really?” She drew out the question for an agonizingly long time. “Well, maybe you should reconsider the occupation you've chosen for your life. Perhaps you don't understand what you're supposed to represent here.”

Heather wished the judge hadn't said the words as she felt the anger rise like bile. Her control functions stopped working and her filter was clogged. Her words began to spew before they had the chance to enter the inspection area of her brain.

“Well, maybe Your Honor should consider the injustice of bringing her right wing views and Christian values into a courtroom which is supposed to have no place for it.”

Heather knew she had crossed the boundary and no longer felt the invisible restraint that had worked so well to prevent outbursts.

Judge Oliva's face reddened and contorted into what Heather could only describe as a look of wrath. The judge looked very spooky to her right then.

"Is there anything else you'd like to share with the court, Ms. Simmons?"

Heather knew it was a question she shouldn't answer but the invitation was too tempting.

"Yes, ma'am," she said. "I think Mr. Bradley is a good father and that the court is single-handedly responsible for the abuse his children have suffered in the foster care you forced them into."

All chatter stopped and the courtroom became very quiet. Judge Oliva looked around desperately and Heather wondered if the woman was allowed to have one of the bailiffs attack her like a dog.

When Heather continued, she spoke matter-of-factly.

"And you might want to consider why you've chosen this grand pedestal for yourself when your closed mindedness only equips you with the ability to run a cash register."

Somehow, the silence got even quieter. Heather looked around at the open mouths of everyone in the room and felt her own expression begin to reflect those around her. The attorneys looked aghast, the criminals stared at her with pride, and Lucas was still laughing in the back row.

After what felt like a lifetime, the judge banged her gavel and directed her attention to everyone in her courtroom.

"Quiet! Quiet down!"

She banged again and motioned for the bailiffs to help calm the crowd, Heather knew she would be punished for exposing them all to her outburst. The sudden action was a lot for everyone to handle as court was never usually this exciting. Heather wondered if she'd be out of jail in time for her trip to the beach with her boys in a few days.

The judge looked at Heather and spoke calmly. "Are you finished?"

"Yes, ma'am," Heather replied. "I'm just trying to help save the world, Your Honor."

Now she was finished.

"Do you know what's going to happen now?" asked the angry judge.

She looked at Heather with a stare so cold, the temperature dropped a little.

"You're going to send me to jail?" Heather asked courageously.

Everyone waited for an answer.

"No, ma'am," the judge answered.

Heather knew that the long pause that followed was intentional. The effect worked like a noose around her neck and each second that ticked by only pulled the noose tighter. She wanted to tell the judge what a drama queen she was but decided the timing was wrong.

“I’m going to work it out so that you have a few months off of work,” the judge said with a smug smile.

Heather heard the indrawn breaths of everyone present. She knew the judge had a lot of authority but trying to suspend Heather was like a search and seizure with no warrant and in the wrong jurisdiction. It just didn’t work that way.

“How are you going to do that, Your Honor?”

Heather was appalled by her own nerve but helpless to control the anger and resentment the judge had nurtured in her for so long.

Both women were obviously furious and working hard to keep their cool.

“Do you really want to continue this sarcasm with me?” asked Oliva.

When Heather heard the judge’s voice start to rise toward the end of the question, she knew not to say another word. The judge couldn’t succeed in forcing her take a leave but she might decide to throw her in jail after all. Heather decided to just keep her mouth shut and let the judge savor the power she thought she had.

The case was called to a close and Heather made eye contact with the judge one last time. Everyone else gathered their briefcases and files and headed for the doors when the judge spoke into her microphone. Her disapproving leer toward Heather never faltered and her voice exposed a simmering rage.

“How will you ever save the world when you have no loyalty?” the judge asked her.

Heather was confused.

“No loyalty, Your Honor?” Heather asked.

Judge Oliva’s expression changed to one of sincerity. Her tone no longer dripped of anger and the sudden change made Heather pay attention.

“Ms. Simmons, you accuse me of being close-minded when I am simply being loyal to my beliefs. They are steadfast and remaining loyal to them has allowed me to get where I am today. You, on the other hand, are wishywashy. I’ve seen you fight both sides of the same argument in different cases.”

She paused for a moment and Heather didn’t reply. She was still busy processing the judge’s words.

“That makes you good in the courtroom but not prepared in the least to save the world. Go find something you’re loyal to and then come back and talk to me about closed-mindedness.”

She dismissed Heather with a bang of her gavel and a turn of the cheek.

The judge's words cut her more than the woman would ever know. Heather was all too aware of her lack of loyalties and the residual guilt that had taken up residence long before. She used to know devotion but she had lost even that and didn't know how to get it back. The world had taught her to accept certain things and to run away from others. It had also forced her to open her mind to endless possibilities. Heather wondered which was worse – holding onto loyalties at the price of a bad result or spreading loyalties around and ending up with a good result.

“I understand your point, Your Honor, and I don't mean to be disrespectful. You asked me questions and I answered honestly.”

The judge wouldn't hear it and the bailiffs gently escorted her out. She had waited for a long time to go off on Judge Oliva and now that she had, she was scared to death.

She glanced at Lucas on her way out of the court room. He was shaking his head but he still wore a small smile. He waved at her with a look of pity and Heather waved back. On her way out of the courtroom doors, she considered the possibility of blaming a bad medication interaction. Dropping her head as she passed her colleagues in the hall, she silently blamed Billy.

On her way back to the parking garage, Heather passed two underground newspaper employees handing out copies of their free weekly papers. Though she wasn't really interested in one, she accepted the outstretched offering anyway. She hated to reject anyone directly.

Heather smiled and she thanked the smiling hippies as she headed toward the dimly lit garage. She made it to the cover before stopping to take a deep breath. For the sake of pride, she held her tears in but once out of view, it all came out.

Chapter 4

November Rain

As luck had it, there was nobody else in the garage to witness her breakdown. Heather made a beeline for her car, her mind in turmoil and her anxieties high. She couldn't remember where she had parked it and tried to calm down by reminding herself that she would have lost her car even in a normal state of mind. Deciding to start with the first floor, she made her way across the long first level. Not finding it there, she headed toward the stairwell.

As she neared the short staircase to the second floor, Heather noticed she wasn't alone. If she continued toward her destination, she would have to pass a tall, scraggly man with misplaced facial features and an assaulting odor. If she turned around, the stranger would know she was avoiding him and the option almost felt more dangerous.

She refused to show her fears to anyone and told herself he was just looking for his own car. He continued to stand very still in his spot where the staircase turned and Heather's hair stood on end. She wouldn't have been as freaked out if he hadn't been staring at her so intently.

She was usually a little pensive in the garage as there were clients who personally blamed her for terminating their parental rights. The scraggly man was not involved in any of her cases but still, he seemed oddly familiar.

When her only choice was to pass him or to turn around, Heather turned quickly, hoping to change her destiny along with the direction.

"Do you have the time?" he asked hoarsely.

His voice was worse than his appearance. The mocking drawl that oozed out of his snarled lips was more chilling than nails on a chalkboard. Goosebumps ran up and down her arms, warning her that terror was on its way. When frightened, Heather's first reaction was to freeze. It took all of her courage and strength to submit to eye contact but she forced herself to turn around and face him.

His smile chilled her so badly that she had to pull both arms in toward her chest to ward away the cold. She glanced away only long enough to peek at her watch.

"It's 1:11 p.m.," she answered hurriedly.

She dismissed him without words as she turned and walked back the way she came. When she heard his first footfall and realized it was directed toward her instead of the stairwell he came from, Heather picked up her pace. She power walked the first level armed with nothing more than prayers of protection. When she felt him following closely behind, she stuck her right hand into her purse to search for a sharp object. She felt a pen and held tightly to the end of it, trying to imagine how much damage she could do by stabbing him in the eye with

a Bic. She also wondered if she would ever be able to stab anyone in the eye.

“Wait! Come back!’ he called out tauntingly.

His tone was unmistakable. The sarcasm in his voice sent up fierce red flags and Heather’s clumsy speed walk turned into a half-run.

She looked around the garage for some help and wondered why she always found herself so isolated during times of peril. She wondered if life really played out like in the movie *Final Destination* and if all the random attacks she’d experienced were death trying to take her again and again.

Her dark thoughts unnerved her almost as much as the man following her. His footsteps invaded her personal space and she could feel his hot breath on her neck. The tiny hairs stood up in salute and it felt as though tiny bugs were crawling all over her. Her skin became icy and her knees started to weaken.

Knowing she only had the capacity to run for so long before she finally facing her fears, Heather abruptly stopped walking.

“What do you want?” she asked without turning around.

Her voice was firm but she stood with her back to him. As scared as she was about getting a sudden bullet lodged in the back of her brain, she was more afraid to turn around to a bullet in the face. Heather decided that she preferred to face her fears backwards.

When he didn’t answer, she pushed away thoughts of what his arm would feel like suddenly curling around her waist.

Unable to withstand one more hot exhalation on the back of her neck, Heather forced herself to turn around while envisioning herself pulling a band-aid from her knee. The horror took on new meaning when she saw that nobody stood behind her.

She still felt the hot breath on her neck and could still sense an ominous presence. Heather ran back across the first level of floors but the warm puffs on her neck continued. Somehow, he was still following her.

Finally spotting her car, she ran to the driver’s door. As she turned the key, Heather instinctively wiped at the sweat on the back of her neck. When she felt a puff of hot hair on the back of her hand, she couldn’t catch the scream that escaped her vocal chords. She opened the door and jumped inside.

Heather’s blurry gaze swept the back seats and then the rest of the garage. There was no one in sight and the absence of her enemy scared her on a different level. She couldn’t protect herself from someone she couldn’t see.

She kicked off her heels and laid them on the seat beside her. They weren’t much but they were the best weapons in her possession. Heather stabbed her key into the ignition and listened to the song that had been fated to play out such a wicked moment in her life.

Bullets with Butterfly Wings was playing and she listened to Billy Corgan whine about

feeling like a rat stuck in a cage. She fought the delirious laughter that threatened to overtake her. The radio always seemed to play out whatever situation was before her and she nervously sang along with the Smashing Pumpkins as she rounded the inner turns of the garage and headed toward the exit.

Despite all my rage, I am still just a rat in a cage.

She didn't understand how fitting the song was until she realized the parking garage was nothing more than a human maze. She told herself to look forward so that she wouldn't get blinded by her fear. The self suggestion came with good timing because what was in front of her at the moment was a cement wall and it was getting closer.

Heather turned the wheel sharply to the left and missed the wall by an inch. She was able to slow down enough to follow the circular decline that promised to lead her out of the garage. She had only two floors to go before escaping the tomb that had once been just a downtown parking lot.

When her cell phone rang, she had no intention of answering but the announcement feature told her that it was Diane calling. Her supervisor had probably just been given the news of her meltdown and Heather needed to hear what she had to say. Even in the midst of her fear, she had to know what fate had planned for her professionally. She would decide during the call whether or not to share what had just happened in the garage with her trusted mentor.

"Hey, Diane," Heather answered.

As she made the next turn, she kept her eyes wide open. She constantly swept her gaze around the perimeter of the garage and between parked cars. Heather hoped the superior she loved and respected hadn't been forced to call and fire her.

"Hey," Diane answered more quietly than usual.

Her voice was soft and her demeanor said something was wrong. It wasn't a good sign as Diane was normally animated and playful with her.

"Did you have an interesting morning?" she asked Heather

"I'm sorry, Diane," Heather gushed without prodding. She wasn't capable of conversational foreplay. "She was so unfair and so inappropriate, I just lost it. What do you have to do to me?"

Her heart clenched at the question even as it came out and she came very close to sharing the demonic experience with her mentor.

"Well, the judge made a few angry phone calls and now you get to take a two-month leave and have a psychiatric evaluation that says you're sane," Diane answered. In that moment, Heather decided to keep the garage incident to herself.

She knew Diane felt bad but that she had also had a job to do. Heather understood her behavior had been bad and that she was lucky she hadn't been fired or criminally charged.

The only thing she could say to appease her boss was that she would increase her therapy and get some rest. Diane knew about Heather's history of attacks as well as her struggle with repressed memories. Her supervisor had never made her feel bad about her problems and Heather vowed to do the same for the woman who had taught her so much.

Heather finished the call just as she turned the corner that offered an exit. She was upset about the suspension but just a little more freaked out by the man who had turned invisible in front of her. Had she turned around to discover maggots oozing from his face, she probably would have been less frightened. To turn around and find nobody there was nightmarish in a different way. She wondered who he was and deflected the thoughts of Thorazine and padded rooms that began to take residence in the corners of her awareness.

Heather tore through the remainder of the garage like a madwoman and almost broke through the white bar that reminded her she was still in the garage. She had forgotten she needed to stop and pay the parking ticket.

She applied sporadic pressure to the brake pedal and heard the car behind her screech to an angry halt. Heather cut her eyes to the rearview mirror and mouthed a silent apology to the fat lawyer fuming behind her. Her apology was answered with the flick of a chubby finger.

She knew that if she saw the scraggly haired man again, nothing would stop her from speeding through the bar, open or closed. A night or two in jail for reckless driving was a far better prospect than running into that nightmare again.

Heather didn't know where to go so she headed to the only other hiding spot she could think of. She needed a few moments to collect herself and assess everything that had just happened. She was either in real danger from something she didn't understand or had somehow stumbled into a level of madness while looking for her car.

Heather pulled into the smaller, private parking garage attached to the opposite side of the courthouse. The building was typically reserved for court personnel but her badge allowed both Heather and her car inside.

She reminded herself it was usually during times of crisis that she was able to hold her head highest. Once she'd had a good cry, she would reach deep down for the gonads that led her out of most bad situations. She would allow a tearful release later but decided not until the crisis was over.

When the need to sob threatened to overtake her before finding a parking spot, Heather reconsidered her inner strength. How could she tell anyone about the parking garage incident without them thinking she had lost her mind? She didn't mind that everyone believed her to be a little loopy but the thought of them truly considering her state of sanity was beyond uncomfortable.

Heather closed her eyes and tried to calm herself down. She thought back to court and a shiver raced down her spine. She couldn't believe she had told off the judge and tried to ease the tightness in her chest by telling herself a suspension was worth Judge Oliva's public humiliation. The pep talk wasn't effective because she didn't believe herself. The judge's discomfort had been admittedly satisfying at the moment but wasn't even close to being

worth the consequences.

Heather's eyes darted around the garage as she tried to decide where she would go next. As much as she wanted to share the situation with Jade, she couldn't worry her little sister. Jade would only get upset and there wasn't anything she could do about it anyway.

Heather looked into her rearview mirror and pushed her driver's seat back as far as it would go. She cracked open both front windows and lit a cigarette. The second level started to become more congested as other drivers searched for their own cars. Heather wondered, with some hostility, if any of them had been visited by a scraggly man who disappeared at will. She figured they probably hadn't and felt the seeds of self-pity start to blossom.

She tried to take her mind off of her fears by guessing what the people milling around had been in court for. Sometimes, in the public lot, she heard angry defendants screaming about the judges who had wronged them but in this garage, most of the occupants were well-dressed and had an air of confidence. The difference in their attitudes told her these were employees rather than litigants.

The elevator beeped and Heather watched the doors open. Lucas came into view and she hunched deeper into her leather seat in her attempt to hide. Remaining indiscrete in a bright yellow car was a challenge but it was one she accepted.

She wondered how many other professionals were huddled in their cars, puffing desperately on a cigarette as they hid from a madman. She doubted there were any but still held out hope that she wasn't alone.

As Lucas got into his own car two spots over, Heather crouched down even more. She peeked up over the bottom edge of her window and watched as he gently reversed his car. She realized that her cigarette smoke was billowing up from the front seat and blowing a stream headed straight for his open passenger window. She prayed that if he noticed it, he would just think her car was on fire and mind his own business.

He drove away and Heather pulled herself back into a sitting position only when he was completely out of sight. She considered going to cry on the shoulder of one of her girlfriends but wasn't sure which one to run screaming to this time. They seemed to lie in wait for yet another bizarre plot to find her and their eagerness for her next adventure would only minimize the significance of her current situation.

Her girlfriends had fun living vicariously through her crazy ordeals and her creepiest situations were perceived as adventures to most of them. Heather needed someone who would take her seriously. She envisioned the pals she had chosen for her trek through life.

She had made many friends throughout her thirty-five years but in the end held onto only the few who passed her unspoken tests of faith and humor. Possession of a limitless sense of humor was an important qualification for a potential friend, as well as the ability to go long periods without hearing from her.

Eventually, she always returned to those she loved. Those who didn't find her life funny or held her accountable for small things, such as not returning calls, would be weeded out

eventually. In the end, she had discovered men displayed more of the necessary qualities than her female friends and that it was usually the girls who ended up on her chopping block. For every girlfriend she kept, Heather had two male friends who made it through the annual weeding process.

In the end, Heather remained loyal to three women she believed had proven their devotion. Jeannie, Angie and Erin all maintained the open mindedness that was the ticket to a lifetime of her love and admiration. They each knew one another through Heather and she appreciated they had formed their own friendships from her introductions.

Heather knew some women whose jealousy would have prevented such bonds; they were the same friends who no longer found themselves in her life. Heather saw envy as a toxic emotion that she rarely allowed to affect her own life and she was proud she had conquered at least one of the seven deadly sins.

She stiffened when she heard voices coming from the stairwell area. Feeling claustrophobic inside the car, she still hadn't decided where to go. Glancing at her face in the rearview mirror, Heather saw the anxiety in her eyes. She put her hand to her hair and ran her fingers through a section that had fallen loose in her run for safety.

Heather had always liked her long thick hair and the soft auburn waves that was her trademark feature. Her family bragged she had gotten the hair and mouth of the family but she wished she had gotten the perfectly straight white teeth or the flawless, olive complexion. Those beautiful characteristics belonged to her sisters. She was grateful to have been blessed with the lips and hair that she hoped outweighed her flaws.

Heather thought about her older sister and about how different she looked from her and Jade. Lisa had been born a blonde while she and Jade arrived in the world as brunettes.

The thoughts led to her little sister's big pregnant belly and she remembered the night Jade discovered she was pregnant. Heather glanced quickly around the garage and made sure her locks were engaged. She knew, subconsciously, she was trying to create a comfortable setting for the barrage of memories that prepared to force themselves on her. Unable to fight the powerful images that assaulted her lately, all she had control of was how she received them.

Heather remembered when she found out she was going to be an aunt. It was the evening of Valentine's Day and friends and family had come and gone after celebrating the day with Heather and the boys. Guests left for their own homes with plates of turkey and mashed potatoes and she had just begun to relax when Jade came running down the hallway in hysterics.

"Come with me now, right now," Jade had told Heather in a voice she would never forget. Her little sister's expression had been intense; she had the rare look people got in their eyes when something surreal had unfolded before them. Immediately, Heather had jumped up from her lazy spot on the sofa and followed her little sister back to the bathroom she had apparently emerged from.

Closing the door behind them, Jade had pointed Heather toward the sink. A pregnancy test

sat on the edge and the older sister had grabbed at it greedily.

Heather had only just begun to register the situation when Jade broke into the happiest cry she had ever seen. Slowly, the situation revealed itself and Heather realized she was going to become an aunt. Jade's pregnancy test displayed a positive result with a pink strip clearly confirming the presence of a fetus. Jade would become a mom for the first time at the age of thirty-three.

Heather sat in the car with her eyes still closed. She smiled at the irony that her sister would give birth at the same age that Jesus died. She didn't know why the thought would occur to her at all since religion was nothing more than another horror story to her, but it did nonetheless.

Jade had been recently divorced and never believed she would conceive a child. After several failed attempts at pregnancy during her marriage, her little sister had decided she was infertile and that fact had led her down a dangerous road. Heather knew that once Jade looked into the eyes of her child, she would never again do anything to cause possible harm to herself. Things were different when you became a mom.

During her divorce, Jade met Matt. He owned the bar she had begun to frequent and she latched onto him as any vulnerable, newly divorced woman would. Heather discovered he was an idiot sooner than her sister did but Jade had to learn on her own. Heather had never seen a more deceptive web of lies woven by one person. As the sisters came to realize that Matt deeply believed his own lies, Heather started to seriously question the man's sanity. When his lies turned to betrayal and he cheated on his pregnant girlfriend with a classless hood rat from the trailer park he secretly frequented, Jade finally walked away.

"I must be like four months pregnant, Heather," Jade had told her with disbelief.

Heather remembered how Jade had started pacing the short distance the bathroom floor offered.

"How could I be four months pregnant but not have skipped one period? I haven't had any symptoms at all, Heather!"

"Why do you have to be four months pregnant?" Heather had asked as she nodded toward the test. "Jade, those things are accurate within like, the first week of pregnancy. You're probably more like four weeks, if that."

"Nope," Jade had answered adamantly. "What are you a doctor now?"

"No, but I'm not an idiot either. I haven't even seen Matt for four months," she said.

"What are you talking about? You haven't been with anyone else?" Heather countered.

"No!"

"What do you mean?" Heather had asked her, confused.

"What do you mean, what do I mean? I haven't done it, had sex, hid the salami," Jade answered sarcastically. She started making graphic hand motions and facial expressions when she ran out of sexual phrases.

“Okay, gross, I get it,” Heather relented. “Well, you’re wrong. You must have done it and you don’t remember.”

Jade had stopped pacing and simply stared at Heather, puzzled.

“Don’t remember?” Jade asked. “What kind of life do you lead that you think that’s normal?”

Though a small smile marked the younger sister’s question with innocent humor, Heather remembered biting her lip and turning red.

“Don’t remember,” Jade repeated amused as she shook her head back and forth.

“Then, you’re four months pregnant and you just didn’t know!” Heather had retorted as she threw back a hand gesture of her own.

Heather remembered Jade looking down at her stomach and back up into her eyes. She had never seen her little sister quite so happy and she hoped their family would come to accept the pregnancy in time. Unmarried parents were judged harshly among the maternal clan.

“What made you get the test anyway? I can’t believe you didn’t even tell me you suspected,” Heather had asked.

“I didn’t,” Jade had answered. “I had a dream.”

“What kind of dream?”

“Something visited me and told me I was pregnant.” “Something?” Heather recalled squawking.

“I don’t know,” Jade stammered. “A ghost or an angel or something.”

“Um, I don’t know what to say to that,” Heather had responded gently, unable to hide her smile.

“You don’t understand, Heather. It was so real.”

Jade had spoken with animation, narrating with hand gestures and expression changes.

“He said I was going to have a baby and that I needed to protect my child at any cost,” she said.

“Wow, Jade. You dreams are much clearer than mine. My guests barely even speak English.”

Heather remembered wanting to ask Jade if she had a progesterone imbalance and deciding against it. She hadn’t wanted her sister to take the question wrong. Both of them had become accustomed to the strange and the inexplicable but they always shared the experiences with each other. The dream of a visitor had been the first time Jade didn’t go to Heather and share her worries.

Heather pulled herself out of the reverie and looked around the garage for bad guys. She smoked the last drag of her cigarette and threw it out the narrow window crack of her driver’s door. Her heart almost stopped beating when someone pounded on the back window.

She jumped so high in her seat that she hit her head on the roof above her. Instinctively, she raised her hand to rub out the pain that was spreading through her temples. She turned her gaze toward the source of pounding and her blood ran cold when she saw nobody was there.

Heather's gaze darted toward each door lock and she tried to reassure herself she was safe. She pressed her face to the glass and tried to look down in her attempt to see if someone had hidden below window level. Again, she saw nothing.

Deciding not to waste another moment investigating the situation, Heather peeled out of the garage. She heard the crunch that cars make when their transmission is thrown roughly into reverse and she tore through the private lot without hesitation. There was only one person for her to see right then.

Chapter 5

Live to Tell

Heather walked into her psychiatrist's office and looked around as she did at the beginning of every session. It was only in Dr. Angel's office that she followed the same routine every week.

Her eyes always landed on the Candy Land game that lived on the corner shelf. Of all the board games on display, it was the one that always stole her attention first. Heather chalked it up to the fact that she often immersed in the land of candy and fairies as a child.

At the sight of the familiar beige couch, a small sigh escaped her lips. It was her safe place. She sat on the sofa, picked up the leather pillow and hugged it tightly to her chest. Throughout the next fifty minutes, the cool cushion would give her something to grab onto if discussions got intense.

Heather assumed her doctor appreciated her new habit more than her old one. Before the pillow squeezing, she would tear his Kleenex to shreds and leave the messy remnants all over his floor. Heather spent the first few years staring ahead during difficult conversations, unfazed as hundreds of tiny pieces were left scattered at her feet.

She often worried about how crazy she appeared to him. Though she knew intellectually that the two of them were the only ones in the room, she still suffered anxiety that others might be listening to her biggest secrets. Visions of men in white coats rushing in after she finally voiced some devastating revelation sometimes kept her quieter than she wanted to be. Heather feared, somewhere in the back of her mind, that she'd wake up to an afternoon of basket weaving at the local crisis center. Her fears were part of the reason she so often held back when she really wanted to let it out.

Her doctor had long legs that ended in the shiniest shoes she'd ever seen. He stood about six feet tall and Heather viewed their height difference as four added inches of protection within their little unit. Try as he did to keep his dark, tousled hair on top of his head, it always fell onto his forehead during sessions. Heather thought it was cute and that it only added to his already massive character.

His shoes were sometimes black and sometimes brown but they were always so well cared for. They often became her focus when she found it difficult to make eye contact. Dr. Angel wore a dress shirt under his vest, exposing only the sleeves and the collar. Heather imagined his closet was in perfect order. His entire presence was both tidy and gentle and his thin build gave him an added touch of gentility. Her doctor's prominent nose gave away his Jewish heritage.

Heather loved him for the role he played in her life. She thought of her psychiatrist as the most powerful person she had ever known because of the information and knowledge she had shared with him. In some ways, she felt as though he knew her better than she knew herself. In worse ways, she felt as though their ten years together still had never revealed who she truly was. He rarely got to see her everyday humor or view her professionalism or

witness the mother she was to her boys and she wanted him to know the things he still didn't see.

Heather sat back against the couch and reached her arm out to the table at her right. There sat the perpetual box full of Kleenex that she often assaulted during sessions. She never knew when their discussions would turn emotional and she figured it was better to have Kleenex in hand and not need it than have it the other way around. The last thing she needed was for her session to be interrupted by a sudden rush of snot and tears running down her face and nothing to wipe them away with.

After a decade of visits to Dr. Angel, the two were still attempting to recover Heather's lost memories. It had been a long and tedious process where she had to learn to stop focusing solely on what she couldn't remember and place the focus on the things that she did recall. They were also attempting to repair the important developmental stages she had managed to skip. Wise beyond her years in some ways, Heather was no more advanced than a two year old in other ways.

Her memories only came to her in bits and pieces. Like a movie with no real order and missing entire scenes, recollection wasn't an easy task. Faces were unclear and details were muddled. The only things that remained clear were the feelings attached to the memories. It was all she had to prove that, however convoluted, the memories were still real.

Heather had located Dr. Angel, the only psychotherapist left in her city, through her health insurance manual. After years wasted visiting different psychiatrists, Heather had begun amusing herself with their stupid questions and their gullibility.

After a couple of years with Angel, however, Heather began to trust in the field of psychology again. For his continued involvement in her life and his willingness to work with her on so many levels, she tried hard to remain an honest patient who remained open to healing.

Heather's mother had begun sending her to therapy after an attempted kidnapping when she was seventeen years old. Her mom had always blamed Heather for putting herself into bad situations and Heather struggled against the theory that her victimization was always her own fault.

The night a stranger tried to throw her into the back of his car and take her away, Heather lost the innate faith most people have in the next person. Her mother had made Heather feel as though the attack were somehow her own fault. Had Heather not been so sneaky, perhaps such things wouldn't happen to her.

She knew she had placed herself on the side of the interstate that night. She made the decision to sneak out and go with friends to the beach against her mother's orders. What she refused to accept was that the result of her decision was the normal consequence of a wayward teenager. Because of their different outlooks, even more problems flourished in her and her mom's already unstable relationship.

The kidnapping wasn't the first time Heather was the victim of random violence and it wasn't her last. Her bizarre string of bad luck and her willingness to plunge herself into

unsafe situations led to a lifetime of near fatalities. It had also convinced Heather she had some kind of invisible warrior on her side. Somehow, she always managed to come out of the horrific situations mostly unscathed.

Aside from bad nerves and mild conspiracy theories, Heather prided herself on the normalcy she was able to find for herself. She had even managed to turn her potential mental health issues into a career. Each time she helped save a child, she saved the scared little girl inside herself.

Heather's frightening experiences provided her with defense mechanisms that allowed her to live her life rather than crumble into a drooling nutcase. Unfortunately, the defense mechanisms had become a problem of their own. Heather's ability to numb out the bad had gotten confused and she had begun to numb out the good as well. Her ability to remain strong in the face of fear came from her ability to separate herself from reality and while it saved her in some ways, it destroyed her in others.

She had begun to disassociate at a very young age and had found, to her dismay, she was unable to stop doing so as an adult. Dr. Angel said it was a healthy and effective defense mechanism designed to survive trauma but that it was also her biggest downfall. Heather's defenses forced her to live in the world she created rather than the one that really existed and that had become unacceptable to her. Despite the dangers that often found her, Heather's biggest fears were not of the world outside of her.

She was her own worst enemy at times and often resisted identifying the origins of her problems. The scared kid inside didn't want to locate, much less defeat, her childhood demons. Because of her subconscious fears, she often maintained continuous chaos and it stalled their work together.

She looked across the room at her doctor and immediately tried to assess his mood. Hyper-vigilance was a long-time habit of hers that stemmed from her need to maintain awareness of all anger levels around her. Heather couldn't open up to anyone whom she couldn't read.

She had come to not only trust Dr. Angel but to idealize him as well. She maintained complete faith in his words and looked at him as though he had all of the answers. He didn't see the unwavering trust as being necessarily healthy and he often challenged her to become angry with him. She still refused to after ten years. She would never expose him to her rage lest she lose him forever.

Nobody in her life understood Heather's relationship with her doctor. She could never explain how much she appreciated his ability to guide her through answers and maintain boundaries. He had the rare ability to give guidance rather than direct the progression of the therapy himself. She couldn't imagine there was anything her doctor could say to her that she wouldn't believe wholeheartedly.

"Where should we start?" he asked, easing his back to the chair and readying his pen and paper.

"You got your hair cut," Heather began.

“Ah. Concentrating on me today, huh?” he asked.

The banter was familiar. She assessed him, he noticed her assessments, and soon they would begin the actual session. She sometimes wondered why she continued to see him when she always knew what he would say. She mused she would save a lot of money if she just put a picture of his face on a big stick and sat it on her living room chair. The thought made her smile and caused her mild concern at the same time.

“Where did we leave off last time?” she asked.

He was quiet. She knew he wouldn't answer the question. One of the rules they'd established long before was that Heather would remember things for herself. Placing the responsibility on her was his way of helping her to unblock the thick bricks she'd erected where an active memory was supposed to be.

“That's right,” she continued, as though he had been an active respondent. “We were talking about Benny.”

At the thought of her friend's memory, Heather's heart saddened instantly. His face and his voice were still so clear in her mind. It was intense clarity for a woman who often forgot where her shoes were.

Benny had played an important role in her circle of friends. His suicide four months earlier had been devastating to all of them but Heather felt as though she had been affected on a different level. The guilt she had experienced in the months since he'd shot himself had, at times, threatened to impede her daily functioning. Most of all, Heather just really missed him.

“That's right,” Angel encouraged. “You were still struggling with guilt over not answering the phone. Can you remind us what that was about?”

Heather smiled. As corny as it was, she loved when he referred to them as “us and we.” She was completely aware that he worded things the way he did intentionally. She knew enough psychology to know what he was doing and why he was doing it but the knowledge didn't dampen the effect. She loved him for knowing how to speak to her better than anyone else ever had.

“You know what it was about,” she said.

Though she would never be outright disrespectful to him, Heather sometimes liked to play head games with her psychiatrist. She found it amusing that she could peg him so well. She'd choose a response she wanted and then design a question or statement to force it out of him. To her dismay, she realized she did that with everyone else she knew and the amusement passed just as quickly. She continued without sarcasm.

“I feel bad still,” she said softly.

“Because you didn't answer the phone or call him back?” he reminded her.

“Yes, of course. Wouldn't you feel bad if your friend called to say he missed you and needed to talk and then blew his brains out after you didn't respond? I mean, seriously?”

She rolled her eyes in an effort to pull in the outgoing tears.

“Do you remember the conclusions we came to about that?”

“That he would have done it anyway,” she repeated, still disbelieving. “And even if I called back or went to him that night, he’d have done it eventually. That I don’t have as much power as I think.”

“You do have power. It’s just not over other people, it’s over yourself.”

“Exactly. I had the power to call back and I didn’t. I just ignored him. I didn’t know.”

She shook her back and forth. She really hadn’t known that Benny was in such a bad place. If she had known, she would have gone to see him. She would have at least called back.

It was during Benny’s funeral that Heather decided to remain more available to her friends and never allow work or daily frustrations get in the way of real people. She still didn’t have the heart to tell him she was already backsliding on the self-made deal.

“I don’t think I’ll ever really get over this,” she admitted. “Can we change the subject for a minute? There’s something I wanted to talk about before I forget. My sister called me on the way here. Lisa, not Jade.”

He seemed interested in her topic of subject change and she took it as an invitation to continue.

“She hates me, you know. She can’t hide it at all anymore. She hates Jade too and my mom.”

Heather shook her head back and forth, still in disbelief at the way her family had fallen apart. She had always thought of Lisa as someone who knew all the answers and she had always trusted her big sister’s judgment. At least, she did until Heather became the object of her judgment.

“What makes you say that?” he asked

“Well, let’s see,” she answered, sarcasm forcing its way into her tone despite her attempts to keep it away. “She said, very seriously in fact, that we were no longer allowed to say more than hello or ask how she’s doing.

She knew her expression told him she was still appalled by the conversation.

“And what did that mean to you?” he continued.

“Uh, it means she’s a cold-hearted, bitch,” she said angrily.

“What is the overriding feeling here, Heather?”

“Anger,” she said firmly.

She knew she wasn’t being honest with herself but anger was safer than the truth so it was what she clung to.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

Heather knew what he wanted her to say but she couldn't do it. She knew that anger wasn't the strongest feeling but she refused to admit it out loud. Vocalizing her real feelings would make it real.

“I can't say it,” she whispered. The need to cry got stronger and it stung the backs of her eyeballs.

“Why?” he prodded.

Her first tear found an opening and Heather's automatic response was to deal with it the only way she knew to deal with pain. She blurred it out. She closed her eyes and deleted the vision of Lisa's face looking back at her with disgust. She hid her real feelings behind one of the many locked doors within her mind and produced a new thought that was completely unrelated.

It wasn't so much a thought as it was a song. *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* poured out of her mental speakers and Heather smiled at the feelings it brought with it. She knew the song reminded her of happier days with Lisa and that her subconscious had chosen it for a very real reason.

“I like Cyndi Lauper,” she said.

She realized that the progression of thoughts that led to that statement made it sound much more sensible to her than it would to him. She had forgotten to give him warning that she was taking a mental break.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

Her doctor didn't smile, exactly. He was used to the random intrusive thoughts and wasn't fazed by the fact that she did it. Heather did believe the content of her compulsive thoughts amused him to no end, however.

“You moved away from something there, I see. Did it get too hard to contain again?”

Heather nodded. She loved that he had a vocabulary for all the things she couldn't say.

Dr. Angel was quiet for a minute and Heather became as uncomfortable by the silence as she always did.

“What? What are you thinking? I'm crazy, right?” she asked.

It was his turn to shake his head.

“No. I'm actually gonna go out on a limb here but I feel like there's a theme here. First on your own, you're able to remember that we ended up talking about Benny last time. You recall the decisions we came to and the resolutions you were comfortable with. Then your thoughts jump to your sister and her callous words to you. Words that, I believe, you don't think say enough.”

“Oh, they said enough,” Heather countered as she fought the sarcasm again.

“Well, I know it felt like a lot but what she actually said was not to expect anything more of her. She didn’t say why she feels that way and that’s what you’re interested in, right?”

“Right,” she answered slowly.

“So, do you believe she said enough?” he asked.

“Well, the words hurt me a lot but did they give me information? No. She communicated to me how she felt now but she never tells me why. She won’t tell me why she hates me so much and I don’t get it. We’re all grown ups now. Why can’t she just tell me?”

“What do you want from her exactly?” he asked.

“I want her to join me. I want her to be with me in the memories of the pain, not against me.”

Heather remembered how they had been bonded by their abuse. It felt better than dealing with it alone.

“Is that what you think Benny wanted from you?” he asked gently.

Tears streamed down her face as she was struck defenseless by what she perceived as a cruel question.

“Are you trying to hurt me?” she asked, betrayal outlining her words.

“No, Heather. This isn’t how I feel. I’m just repeating your words back to you.” He glanced down at his notepad and Heather knew what he was saying. His furious scribbling wasn’t done in vain. It helped when they needed to remember things together.

“Yes, that’s how I think Benny felt,” she answered sadly.

She didn’t plan to waste anymore energy on trying to keep the tears at bay. She knew when to throw in the towel.

“It’s interesting how very opposite the situations are,” he ventured.

“How do you mean?” Heather sniffled.

“Well, in one situation, you get a phone call asking for help, almost begging you. In the other, the person is telling you she doesn’t want or need you at all.”

“Hmm. I hadn’t thought of it that way,” she said.

Heather put a tissue to her eyes before her mascara seeped in and did even more damage.

“Why do you think Lisa feels the way she does?” he asked.

“She has faulty perceptions,” Heather intellectualized.

“In what way?” he asked, interested.

“Well, she stayed where she was when Mom moved us out of state. She was eighteen and didn’t want to leave all of her friends. Jade and I had no choice but to become close. We left our home together and started all over again in another state. I think our relationship hurts Lisa.”

She'd never admit it but she's jealous. She hates that Jade and I have such a strong bond and she feels left out."

"Have you left her out?" he asked.

Heather's first response was defensiveness.

"Of course not," she said, anger raising the level of her tone. "It's not my fault we moved. I was just a kid. And whatever else she thinks I did is wrong too."

A flash of memory sliced into her thoughts and Heather experienced it has a pinprick to the heart. Lisa was young in the memory, about twelve years old. She was protecting her little sisters from something but Heather couldn't see what it was. The familiar frustration forced her fists to ball up in her lap.

"What was it?" Dr. Angel asked. "What did you see just now?"

Heather's voice trembled when she spoke. She didn't know what had shaken her so badly.

"It was Lisa. She was keeping us away from something," she answered flatly.

"Something?" he countered.

"I don't know what. It was like she was holding us away from something. All I saw was the three of us and I don't know what it means."

"Okay, that's all right," he said, an eagerness detectable in his voice. "Don't worry about who or what else is there. How does the memory feel? How do you feel about Lisa in the memory?"

"Love," she whispered. "I love Lisa in the memory. She was protecting us. She loved us."

Heather couldn't continue the conversation. When feelings became too overwhelming, her cognitive skills were the first to go.

She knew it was happening by the blurriness that overtook her pupils. Dr. Angel's face appeared to her as though it were underwater and the words that came from his mouth stopped making sense altogether. Nothing came together anymore.

"I'm getting blurry," she told him.

It was the code that told him where she was, both mentally and emotionally. On a scarier level, it told him where she wasn't.

"Okay," he said firmly. He wouldn't push her. At times he did, but not on this occasion.

"Is there another direction you think we can go?" he asked.

He was trying to see if she was capable of continuing at all.

"Yes, actually," she began, but then paused. "I know you probably won't find this important but I want to talk about the attacks again."

He smiled a sincere smile.

“You automatically assume I won’t find that important?” he asked.

She knew what he really meant by the question.

At the last minute, Heather had chosen not to share with him anything that had happened that day. She didn’t tell him about the outburst in court and she didn’t disclose the incident in the garage. She couldn’t bear the possibility of him not believing her.

She had sped to his office with every intention on purging herself but decided in the end that she could still draw needed strength from their session without baring all. She also figured that if she began talking about the attacks again, it may help her to better visualize the men who had tried to harm her throughout her life. Somehow, she knew that important answers hid themselves in the memories of the attacks.

“What are you looking for, Heather?” he asked.

She cringed at the thought he could read her mind so she broke the eye contact.

“I don’t know,” she lied. “I just feel that it’s important we talk about it right now.”

“Okay,” he said.

She shifted her position on the cold leather until she found one more comfortable. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to get lost in the memory of that night long before.

‘11:11,’ she said to herself.

She recited the time whenever she needed help taking a trip to the past. The eerie number had come up so often during her lifetime that she had begun to think of it as a sign. Research into the 11:11 symbol told her that its presence meant she was headed in the right direction and Heather had started to rely on it as a mantra.

An eerie coldness welcomed her to the vivid memory she’d been seeking. Heather squeezed her closed eyes even tighter than they had been and tried to envision the attack on the side of the interstate.

Chapter 6

P s y c h o

She had been seventeen years old and was grounded as usual. Despite her restrictions, her mother had allowed her to spend the night at a girlfriend's house. Rene had decided it would be a good idea to sneak out with Tom and Joe, their latest male companions, so the two couples went to the beach with a cooler of beer and a couple of joints. Heather often wondered if her life would have gone differently had she not gotten into the van with her friends that night.

She remembered the sound of the crowbar that rolled around the back of the van every time they made a turn. She remembered the fear of getting back to Rene's too late and missing her mother's good night call, exposing her rebellion.

They were headed home when Joe pulled over on the shoulder so that he could jump out and pee "real quick." She clearly remembered the feeling of the van as it veered too quickly to the right side of the road. Joe had parked in the emergency lane and laughingly took a lumberjack style piss break. When he got back into the van and turned the key in the ignition, there was no sound and no vibration

The guys were drunk and neither one of them knew what to check when they opened the hood. They tinkered with gadgets in the engine but their assessment of their vehicular troubles was as about as mature as two four year olds with a Lego car problem. Rene got tired and went to nap in the van, leaving Heather to flag down late night drivers on her own.

Heather recalled for her doctor how she had stood on the side of the road, waving to anyone who happened to drive by. She practiced apologies and desperate for a ride, hiked up her skirt just a tiny bit. The only car that pulled over was a light purple Volkswagen which the driver parked about thirty feet ahead of the van. Its brake lights turned on and off for awhile and Heather remembered hoping against hope that there had indeed been a driver behind the wheel of that car.

"Do you need a ride?" a man's voice called out.

Both the Volkswagen and its occupant were motionless except for the brake lights that continued to blink on and off. Heather declined the offer and called out a "thanks, anyway" before the driver backed the car toward the van and asked what he could do to help. She remembered he seemed to be reacting to some unknown source of amusement. Heather's instincts screamed their savior's intentions were bad but she brushed it off.

As Heather spoke the memory out loud for Dr. Angel, she heard the strain slide into her own voice. She knew he could see her squinting as she tried to look more closely at the motorist in her memory. She needed to see him more clearly so she sped up the memory and saw herself walking closer to him, as she had done that night. The man still sat in the driver's seat and as she neared him in her memory, her heart pounded from her seat on the

doctor's couch.

When the stranger in her mind made his next move, Heather became rigid before her doctor's eyes. The guy had reached out and grabbed her wrist as he tried to pull her into his car. She fought him immediately but he started to drive away, still holding onto her as he did. Though she tried her hardest to pull away, she realized he was too strong to fight. He badly wanted her in his car.

Her friends didn't understand what was happening until Heather and her attacker were almost out of sight. With the bad guy in the driver's seat and the victim attached to his strong hand and moving car, they weaved together down the interstate as he continued his efforts to pull her inside. She'd been forced to run so as not to be pulled in but her legs had become tired and weak. Eventually, her legs just stopped moving and because of their immobility, Heather's body was dragged over painful cement at too many miles an hour while the maniac still clutched her arm tightly.

Heather thought she had been screaming the prayers within her mind but Joe later told her that he heard her screams. She would never understand how a teenage boy found the strength and speed that her friend did that night but like a superhero at the exact moment of crisis, Joe chased both victim and attacker down the interstate until he caught up. Upon seeing he had company, the strange man let go and Heather's body slammed onto the unforgiving ground. In the last moment, she made direct eye contact with her attacker and as she sat before her doctor, Heather tried to freeze frame the memory.

She pulled herself back to her current reality and opened her eyes to see Dr. Angel's gentle eyes staring back at her. She was afraid to speak for fear of losing the memory in her words. She could almost hear the ding of the invisible timer and she knew the moment had come.

Without a word to her waiting doctor, Heather closed her eyes again and transported herself back into the memory. It hadn't yet faded completely so she used its recent activity to draw the memory back into existence.

She was seventeen again and her attacker's tight clutch had just released her into a rough fall. She could almost feel the fresh scrapes on her legs and the gravel pressed to her cheek. The Volkswagen braked to an abrupt stop that almost ran over her arm. Heather could hear Joe's heavy footfalls getting closer and she heard him screaming swears and threats to the man who took her.

She looked up into her attacker's eyes and he looked down at her from his spot behind the wheel. His demeanor was calm and quiet and he smiled a small smile at her. His dark eyes were terrifying and the thirty-five-year-old Heather who sat before her psychiatrist bypassed the fear of the terrified teen she had been on that night. Heather saw what she knew she would see and having found the answer she was looking for, she pulled herself out of the violent reverie.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that Dr. Angel had leaned forward and was watching her carefully. A scream was stuck in the back of her throat and when she gulped it

back she almost choked on her own saliva. It was one of the rare moments where she couldn't share with her doctor such an important piece of information. If she told him the truth, it could be the end of their safety and sharing and the beginning of commitment papers and morning rounds.

He was scribbling on his pad so she assumed he'd been paying attention. Heather raised her eyebrows and offered a weak smile. She nodded toward the active pen.

"What are you writing?"

"Why is that important to you right now?" he asked. "Forget it," she answered, deflated.

Thoughts of Billy pierced first her consciousness, then her conscience. It was guilt's normal pattern and it traveled merrily toward self-destruction. Trying to control its travails was like trying to holding off a million sperm in search of the coveted egg. She envisioned them together with bodies intertwined, floating in and out one another as they watched themselves in a mirror.

"What is it?" asked Dr. Angel.

Heather jumped at the sound of his voice. She'd almost forgotten she was on his couch and it took a moment for the question to register.

"Nothing," she answered quickly but a small shameful smile gradually pulled at the left side of her face.

"Did I look guilty?" she asked.

She knew it was an impossible question to answer but thought there was a chance he just might try.

"Did you feel guilty?" he asked.

"Ah, touché," she joked. "Actually no, I didn't at the time. But now that you bring it up, yes, yes, I do."

Heather had slipped into a jocular mood without warning. Billy stirred up a lot of feelings inside of her and her automatic response was to minimize them to herself. The process caused an overload to the brain and left her exhausted. She yawned.

When Dr. Angel didn't initiate further conversation, Heather strangled the silence with the truth.

"I was thinking about Billy," she admitted.

"And what were you feeling during the thought?" he asked.

She thought about it for a moment.

"Excitement, I guess?" she asked, more than told him.

"That's a physical response," he challenged. "What emotion were you feeling?"

Heather searched different levels of herself for an answer to the question. She searched her brain and found no answers. She checked her palms to see if a physical reaction could work as a lifeline to the million dollar question. They weren't sweating from any kind of physical excitement. She knocked on the door to her heart but nobody answered.

"I feel nothing. I'm not allowed to feel anything," she finally said.

"Who says so?" he asked.

"I say so. Billy says so. I'm pretty sure his wife would say so too," she finished.

"I don't think any of them have an actual say so over your feelings, Heather. They can have some control over your actions maybe but not what you feel."

Heather felt a knock on her heart's door but instinct forced her to resist. Dr. Angel had often told her to visualize the doors in her mind. He had walked her through exercises where she had to imagine a long hallway and envision the doors that she'd kept so heavily barricaded. His goal had been to allow Heather the control she needed to unlock the parts of her that she had hidden from herself but it never worked out the way they had planned. The feelings behind the doors overwhelmed her and she was afraid. Like Pandora's box, Heather never knew what she would find if she opened a door.

"Are you trying to open a door?" he asked gently.

He knew her so well. If anyone else had tried to become as intimate, she would have already found a way to destroy the relationship. Dr. Angel was the only person she had ever allowed to knock on the door with her. There were times when Heather had pictured herself as a child walking through the door with her small hand held firmly in her doctor's strong one.

"Yes," she answered softly.

"Are your feelings for Billy behind a door?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm pretty sure," she answered.

"What do you get out of your relationship with him?" he asked.

"He knows me. I mean, even though it's mostly physical, it's not like he doesn't know me. I've always shared my secrets with him. I tell him about my job, I discuss my thoughts with him; we laugh about things,"

She paused when she heard the words come out of her mouth.

"It's not what you're thinking," she said quickly

"What am I thinking?" he asked.

"You're thinking that I love him because those are the things people do when they love each other, but you're wrong. I don't love him. I couldn't. We don't even really know each other. We've never had to fight over money or the kids. We've never been through tragedy together. He doesn't know my fears or my dreams or my middle name for that matter. It can't be love," she persevered.

“Yet he’s the most stable relationship you’ve ever had,” he guided.

Heather was quiet. Something registered inside and she couldn’t resist the smile that had started pasting itself on her face. Revelations were sometimes very comical to her.

“So are you!” she laughed. “Oh my God, that’s funny. My two most stable relationships are my psychiatrist and my lover!” She laughed more. “That’s priceless,” she chuckled. “That’s awesome.”

He didn’t respond and Heather wondered what he was thinking.

“I’m not jealous of his wife,” she interjected quickly.

“Explain what you mean by that,” he tried.

“I can’t love him or else I’d be jealous and I’m not. I want his marriage to work. I want him to have a happy family. I want for him to be in love with her and all that crap,” she insisted.

“Because that’s safe for you,” he responded. She wasn’t sure if it were a question or a statement.

“No, it’s because he’s a liar and a cheater. Why would I want him?” she asked.

He shifted again and his shoes caught Heather’s attention. The tan color was enhanced by a deep shine and she often wondered if he sat at his bedside polishing shoes every night.”

“Does your wife polish your shoes?” she asked.

When he didn’t answer, she decided she may have traveled too far out of therapeutic bounds so she just shook her head instead.

“Forget it,” she added before he had a chance to ask why shoe polish was important to her.

Heather wondered often why she didn’t feel any envy for Billy’s wife. She reminded herself that most women continued affairs for the sake of love and she knew from past relationships, love would never allow her to share a man. She lacked what she thought was a normal amount of jealousy and realized the lack of issue had become a problem in itself.

“Why are people jealous?” she asked.

“Other people have something they want,” he answered.

“Then why don’t they just go get what they want?” she asked.

“Sometimes someone already has it,” he said.

“That makes no sense,” she said and didn’t try to pull back the snarl that invaded her lip.

“No?”

“No,” she answered quickly. “I’m happy for people when good things happen to them. I think it’s great when a co-worker gets promoted or when my sister belts out a song well or when one of my friends falls in love. I mean, what the Hell?”

Her stomach clenched as a recent memory cut into her thoughts. Though Heather shared almost everything with her doctor, the recollection was too private. She wasn't sure why she was so reluctant to talk about it when she had told him some of the most intimate and embarrassing moments of her life but her unwillingness to let him in was fierce.

In her mind's eye, Billy was at the foot of her bed putting his shirt on after a mid-day quickie that she had rushed out of work early for. She remembered wishing he would just crawl back into bed and put his arm around her before falling asleep. Heather tried to shake the thought out just as she had when it really happened.

She was about to address her doctor with a subject change when the memory reared its head again. It became more vivid and seemed to widen as though she were just made privy to the director's cut. She remembered the words he said that day and remembered the feelings she had forced away when he said them. Heather had no choice but to let the memory play out and she watched as Billy put his shirt back on.

"Are you going straight home?" she had asked him.

He'd laughed and nodded before throwing back his trademark sarcasm.

"Why, dear?" he joked. "Do you need me to run some errands for you?"

"Yes, actually," she'd answered.

Heather had gone along with the phony game where they pretended to have a real relationship. She remembered that Jack's half finished tree house sprang to mind.

"I need you to run to Home Depot and grab me some wood," she played.

"But, I just gave you wood," Billy had grinned.

"Funny," she'd said flatly.

The game was over. The five seconds she had allowed herself to envision them in different roles was completely stomped out by Billy's need to remind her who and what she really was to him. That she went along with it made Heather disrespect herself even more. She wondered why the memory chose to reveal itself during a discussion about envy.

She had experienced the discomfort that came with longing secretly for another woman's man. Part of her really wished she could send Billy to run errands for her but she'd suppressed that part and stuffed it behind a door that she never re-opened – until that moment on the therapeutic couch. A realization came to her as she looked up and met Dr. Angel's eyes.

"What is it?" asked Dr. Angel.

"What? Nothing," she replied.

Heather knew that even if the memories were locked behind her invisible doors, they still existed. She knew that with all the energy she used to hide them, she may as well face and destroy them but it wasn't within her power.

“Are you sure?” he asked with mild concern.

His glasses sat perched on his nose in their usual spot and Heather just stared blankly at him. She realized she must have had quite an expression on her face to incite the one he had on his but she continued to portray the same phony calmness to him that she showed the rest of the world. When it occurred to her that she had spent her entire session coming to conclusions and keeping them to herself, she wondered what it meant.

“I’m positive,” she answered. “It’s nothing.”

They talked more about the extremes that she suffered and the importance of her finding life in the gray areas but Heather still couldn’t get her attacker’s face out of her mind. Although it had been almost twenty years since her attack on the interstate, the man looked exactly the same in the garage earlier that day as he did on that night.

She knew it was time to start looking for answers in places she hadn’t previously allowed herself to consider. All she wanted right then was to be close to her sister.

Heather said goodbye and prepared her mind and body for her retreat from the only safe haven she knew. Dr. Angel reminded her that their next appointment was in exactly one week, though they both knew she was well aware. Their appointment times never changed. It was the same time and same day every week for the past several years. His words weren’t meant as a reminder of her appointment. They were a reminder of his constant presence in her life and an affirmation that he wasn’t going anywhere before they were to meet again. He knew she needed it somehow.

Heather walked out of his office and through the lobby without paying attention to anyone or anything around her. She felt rushed and annoyed and was uninterested in the patients who waited for her sloppy seconds with the doctor. Had she paid attention, she might have noticed that there was only one other patient waiting his turn. She might also have noticed that he was watching her intently from behind the magazine he held in front of him.

Chapter 7

True Colors

Heather had mixed feelings about accepting a dinner invitation from her mom. She loved the home cooking and the comfortable memories it brought with it but wondered if the evening would be worth it. Dinner with the family was always hit or miss, either going very smoothly or ending in complete disaster. The inability to predict which dinner would turn into a war of tensions and which would find its way into her happy memory bank always made her mom's invitations frightening.

Heather thought about walking into Jack and Tommy's bedrooms to nag for them to get ready. Lost sneakers and hidden keys often stalled them an extra ten minutes and she was trying to get a headstart on the chaos. Her teenager walked into the kitchen barefoot, arms in the air defensively.

"I can't find my socks, Mom," Tommy insisted.

She couldn't prevent the eyeroll. She hated to make them think she was annoyed by them but sometimes she just wanted to shake her sons back to reality. She rolled her eyes and talked herself out of an outburst. She loved her sons and wanted them to grow into decent, responsible and honest men. She knew the honesty part would be a challenge since she had her own lifetime battle with the truth and was pretty certain the boys had caught her penchant for dishonesty.

There were many worries she didn't have in regard to her oldest son and Heather was grateful for each one of them. She hadn't caught him sneaking out or drinking or using drugs and she hadn't found used condoms in his room. She'd never had to listen to a stammering and hesitant speech about a pregnant girlfriend and didn't get phone calls from the police station telling her that her teenager had been arrested or, God forbid, in a drunk driving accident.

Heather appreciated the things Tommy did but even more, she adored him for the person he was on the inside. He had been a beautiful child who caught the attention of everyone who passed by. His uniqueness called out from the richest and snottiest to the most desolate and poor and it said the same thing to all of them – I am your friend.

He had a soul she believed had been nurtured over many lifetimes in order to become what he was today. Tommy would give a stranger the shirt off his back and would defend the honor of those who deserved it as well as those who didn't. He was kind and compassionate and more secure about himself at age sixteen than she was at thirty-five. Heather felt a gushing pride at the good person he had grown into.

Since the moment she first looked into his eyes, she had been proud to introduce Tommy as her son. As he grew older and began to find his talents, Heather looked for every opportunity to introduce him as her own. His creative guitar playing and relaxed style convinced Heather he had a chance at fame. His leadership and basic sense of rightness

convinced her he had a chance to become huge.

The struggles they did have were painful for Heather but luckily, they were still in the mild stages. She had caught him lying but it didn't bother her as much as when he justified his lies. She had also discovered that stealing came much easier to him than it should be but no matter what sins Heather caught her son battling, nothing hurt her more than when he pulled away from her. She knew he was a normal teenager showing signs of typical rebellion but the awareness didn't make it hurt less. The separation left her with a void and she resented that she'd been forced to accept the role of the dictator and punisher in his life.

Heather trusted they would return to the place where both understood one another. There would be time again for mother and son to share their common love for music and movies. They would have more chances to sit in front of the TV and laugh together at their favorite comedians while they stuffed their faces with popcorn.

Heather knew there would be a chance for them to make more music videos together and she couldn't wait. The project had given them the chance to combine their love of music with her need to hold onto a connection. They would find a time in the future to run from one theatre into another in the hopes of catching a free movie. Regardless of the ruts they sometimes found themselves in, Heather knew she and Tommy would be able to share their need for risk and adventure together again and she held onto that knowledge to give her strength through their roughest times.

But for the time being, she knew that Tommy saw her as the enemy and reluctantly, she had to continue playing the part.

"You didn't take out the trash again, Tommy," she said as she peered out the kitchen window with disgust. The side of the yard had filled up with the garbage again because he had forgotten to bring it out front for the garbage men. "Sorry but you're not going out tonight," she added.

"But, Mom! Tonight is national state night! I miss it every year!" he almost yelled.

"I guess you shouldn't get grounded every year at about the same time," she responded, more sarcastic than planned. Heather thought there was a good chance he had just made up the holiday as a way of beefing up the importance of the night's events.

"I'm always grounded, it doesn't matter when it is!" he said loudly. She knew he was making an effort not to yell at her and she both appreciated and expected the effort.

Tommy was mad again just like that. Despite her great strides to bring him closer to her, she had lost him again in one quick argument. Her hard work had been for naught and she had to start all over again. Fortunately, she loved him enough to try for a million lifetimes.

He stomped out of the kitchen dramatically and his little brother entered in his wake.

"What's wrong with my brother?" Jack asked.

Heather loved it when they referred to each other

as brothers. She knew that the spoken words would help to reaffirm the significance of their

bond. The possessive quality of the wording would work to cement their attachment and she encouraged it. She reminded herself that she wouldn't always be there to care for them directly and that it was her job to help them stock up on courage, pride, and strength so that they could do it for themselves.

"He doesn't like to obey," Heather answered.

"I don't either," Jack grinned.

"Yeah, but you still do," she said smiling. "And you better keep it that way!"

"That's cool. Where are my tech decks?"

Referring to his most recent obsession, Jack began the search for the several miniature versions of skateboards that he had become addicted to. Rather than fighting her son's abundant love for his new toy, Heather decided instead to encourage it. She figured that if she couldn't beat him, she could join her child in his passions and she helped him build a village to house an entire miniature skate world.

Heather planted a kiss onto Jack's head and her lips tingled from the delicate hairs as they brushed a soft curl. She walked past her son and found herself standing in the front yard. It wasn't a planned move as much as an instinct to just stop for a minute and look around. She often had to hit life's pause button so that appreciation would find an opportunity to seep in.

The street was quiet and there wasn't a neighbor in sight. Heather wasn't bothered by their absence as much as she was by their presence. The neighbors had never given Heather or her small family a friendly reception. In the six months since they'd moved into their new home, she'd had little contact with any of the people she shared her new street with. She wasn't certain why the neighbor ladies excluded her from activities they involved themselves in and it hurt her feelings. She wanted to be included but would never admit it to them or anyone else.

When Jack had a lemonade stand and not one neighbor came over to offer the little boy a quarter for a cup, Heather knew she was living amid some serious resistance. She tried not to let it bother her and continued to be friendly with them. She wanted them to believe that their snickering and gossip had no affect on her but it did. At times, she longed to have a friend close by, a place she could run to when her own household became too difficult. Heather started to wonder if it were her own attitude and paranoia that had prevented such friendships from flourishing when she felt the sun calling to her.

She looked up at the sky and the powerful rays forced her to close one eye. It had been the first day without rain in two weeks and she realized she actually missed the healthy and hopeful atmosphere the sun could provide.

Three teenage boys were coming down the street and Heather could tell they were headed her way. The kids were friends of Tommy's and she knew they were coming over to see if her punished son would be allowed to hang out. She cringed inside, knowing how bummed out he would be when he realized he had to spend the day with his grandparents

while his friends got to skate and play beneath the welcoming sun.

“Hey, Tommy’s mom,” Tucker said.

He was shorter than Tommy and had piercing eyes and an interesting face that made Heather wonder what his parents looked like. He had always been respectful in her home and so far, seemed to be a good friend to Tommy.

“What’s up, Tucker?” she asked.

“Can Tommy come out and play?” he teased.

“Yeah, please?” added Little Joe.

Joe was dubbed ‘little’ for obvious reasons. He was very small for his age and despite his sixteen years, could easily be mistaken for a friend of Jack’s rather than Tommy’s. What he lacked in height, Little Joe made up in personality. His wit and ability to shut down an uncomfortable situation were so great that he almost appeared to have a superpower. Heather pictured Little Joe in a costume and giggled out loud.

“Sorry guys, we’re going to dinner at my parents’ house,” she answered.

“Is he grounded again?” asked D. J.

D. J. had been Tommy’s friend for years. A few years before, the boys had introduced their moms to one another and Heather began a short-lived friendship with Dana, D. J.’s mother. Eventually, both women realized neither one of them was in a position to offer friendship at that time in their lives and their short-lived union had ended badly. But the boys remained best friends and neither mother got in the way of their friendship.

“Yeah, guys, he’s grounded again,” Heather answered. She didn’t get into specifics because it was Tommy’s place to share that type of information with his friends. Her role wasn’t to embarrass her teenager or to expose his mistakes to anyone outside the home. “He’ll be able to hang out tomorrow. Come back in the morning and I’ll make omelets for you guys, okay?”

They agreed happily and headed off into the sun on their skateboards. Deciding the time had come to face her family, she practiced a happy face. Heather had no intention on letting them know that she was pretty certain she was losing her mind. Until a full blown meltdown took over, she would hide from her loved ones anything that might worry or alarm them. She walked back into the house and yelled for her sons to get in the car.

“Let’s go, guys!” she yelled before opening her driver’s door and getting in.

The sisters timed their arrivals at their parents’ house perfectly. They pulled in at the same moment and dragged themselves out of the cars and up to the door. One short doorbell ring later, Tim answered. Heather’s stepfather offered his usual welcoming smile and motioned for them to come in.

“Hello girls and boys,” he said, adopting a goofy tone.

“Hey Grandpa!”

They greeted and hugged him before heading into the home the women had grown up in. Tim was the man both Jade and Heather would have looked for to marry their mom if she hadn't found him herself. He was patient and kind and had taught them what a real man was supposed to be.

He had shown them through example that a husband works for his family and cares for the mother. He had accepted his new wife's teenage daughters and all of their problems without hesitation. Whenever Heather found her herself in dire straights, no matter what the cause, it was most often Tim she called for help and he was always there.

His part-time beard was gone this dinner and his daughters told him how handsome he looked. They met up with their mother in the kitchen and hugged her tightly before asking if they could help with dinner.

"No girls, that's all right. I think we're just about ready," Laurie answered. She had already set the table and was laying out a spread of roast pork, mashed potatoes and veggies. It was Heather's favorite childhood dinner and she appreciated that her mother remembered it and continued making it.

"Where's John?" the sisters asked together.

"He isn't coming tonight," Laurie grumbled, either unable or unwilling to hide her annoyance.

Heather knew her mother wasn't happy about his extended absence from all of their lives. Heather's stepbrother had social issues that prevented his attendance at most family outings.

John had joined their family when his father married their mother twenty years earlier. He looked a lot like Tim and they shared many of the same expressions but that's where the comparisons ended. John didn't have his dad's ability to take life as it came and had fallen prey to depression, anxiety and resentment. Because of his disdain for the world and the people in it, he had begun missing too many family dinners and too many holidays for Laurie to forgive.

Both sisters loved John as though he were their blood. He had lived with each of them at different times throughout their adult lives and it was during those times that he had seemed the happiest. Eventually, living situations changed and it felt as though they'd lost their brother when he moved back into his own apartment. Without the forced daily contact, John kind of fell away and disappeared most of the time. They worried about him often but mostly, they just missed their little brother.

Just as Heather started to pour the drinks, her cell phone rang. She went to the back room where she had thrown her purse and fished for the phone inside. When she looked at the caller ID, Heather almost stopped breathing. The location identifier said the call was coming from her own house. Nobody else had a key to get to her place besides her boys and they were in the next room.

She considered not taking the call but knew she wouldn't be able live with the weak decision so she mashed the talk button.

“Hello?” she asked nervously.

“Hello?” her voice asked back.

The shock of hearing herself on the other end caused her to instinctively press the end call button. Heather fumbled with the phone in her attempt to dial and had waited almost an entire minute before controlling the shakes enough to work her fingers. When she was finally successful, she listened to four long rings, a click and then her voicemail.

Heather listened numbly to her cheerful outgoing message and she felt deflated. She knew she would never understand what had just happened. She couldn't tell anyone that she had just received a call from herself lest they make their own frantic call to Dr. Angel. Too many inexplicable things were happening and Heather knew if she didn't get to the bottom of them soon, things were bound to worsen.

Chapter 8

Love Me Dead

Heather picked her boys up from school and brought them to the recreation center around the corner from their new house. She dropped Tommy off out front to skateboard with his long-haired cohorts and said a quick prayer that he was safe in her absence. His circle of friends was easily identifiable by their permanently implanted head phones, ragged out boards and laid back attitudes. Heather was glad her son had chosen a group that allowed for exercise, despised drugs and adopted such a relaxed perception of life.

“Bye, sweetie, I’ll call you on our way out. Be good. I love you.”

She punctuated her statement with a kiss to his forehead.

When she found an empty spot, Heather parked her car in the crowded lot and walked Jack to the main annex so that he could go swimming. She had signed both of her sons up at the rec center believing it was important to get them acclimated to their new neighborhood. The last thing she wanted was for her fears to turn their normalcy into a luxury.

The guilt of taking them away from their friends was greater than she had anticipated and Heather often had to give herself little affirmations of positive energy. She told herself that the negativity could only seep in if she allowed it to and often willed herself to be the dam that would hold it back.

She was only looking for a better life for her boys but the nagging guilt continued to tug at her like a needy child. At the heart of her discomfort, Heather realized she was more nervous about seeing her stalker than anything else and she reminded herself that she didn’t have the luxury of sitting around feeling guilty. She needed to preserve all of her energy should the need arise for her to protect her children.

As she opened the doors, Heather held Jack’s warm hand in her own and felt calmer knowing the public place provided more security than their private home. She reminded herself that she could call Tommy on his cell phone if she got nervous and just decided to immerse herself in the safety of the crowd.

Damon planned to leave town for a few days and Heather knew she still had Joey to turn to if she needed muscle. She relaxed in the knowledge that there was usually a strong, brave man nearby and that her children wouldn’t be left at the mercy of her own quivering karate stance. Though she would never admit it out loud, Heather did depend on men for more than just the superficial things she claimed and she often faked the bravado she displayed when describing their uselessness to her friends.

Physically, either one of her exes was better equipped to deal with a madman and she couldn’t rightfully deny that. A combination of their anger management issues combined with the unregistered guns each ex kept in his closet would provide her the army and arsenal she needed.

Heather sat on one of the lounge chairs that lined the pool deck and cursed herself for having worn jeans and a black T-shirt. Had she foreseen the trip to the recreation center, she would have worn a bikini underneath her clothes.

The blazing sun sent a direct beam of heat her way and aimed itself at the top center of her head. When she reached her hand up to block it out, she imagined she was searing her fingers on the edge of a light saber and decided she wasn't prepared to deal with another moment of exhaustion or dehydration. Heather found it difficult not to swear as she wiped a new line of sweat from her forehead.

The ineffectiveness of sitting still while she had answers to find was almost worse than the brush fire sprouting from the roots of her hair. Though she had found a semi-comfortable position on the lounge chair, she continued to fantasize about jumping into the water with all her clothes on.

Heather struggled with worries of how she could maintain normalcy for the boys. They were children and they didn't deserve premature exposure to the terrors of the world just yet. Their lessons in courage, strength and logic weren't nearly complete and her sons needed more training to deal with the world that awaited them.

Her stalker was threatening all of their plans. If the danger had involved only Heather, she would probably have already been swallowed whole by her panic but it didn't. The threat to her children created a fury within her that far surpassed fear. The combination of love and fear supplied Heather with mental and spiritual ammunition, giving her strength and clarity. Heather realized that fashioning her anger into a weapon might be her greatest power so she refused to let it go.

She wished for the tenth time that day that she had trusted Dr. Angel enough to tell him about the parking garage incident but she still feared he wouldn't believe her. Worse yet, he might try to convince Heather that her mind was no longer intact. She prayed she wasn't finally losing her grip on reality.

Her short prayer was interrupted by loud voices and noisy splashing so she pulled her attention back to the outside world and zoned in on the new commotion around her. She heard Jack talking to other children who floated by in water wings or on tubes.

"Can you float on your back? I can, watch!" her son asked whoever would listen.

She loved to see him happy. His mood was infectious and Heather had no immunity when it came to either of her boys. She loved them with such rawness and intensity that whatever they were feeling, she knew she felt it twice as much.

She tried to remember what it felt like to be seven years old and to still have the ability to get excited about something as simple as floating on her back. In response to her silent query, Heather was suddenly gifted by a shock of forgotten feeling. She remembered sensations she'd experienced as a little girl and slowly began to look around the pool, trying to scope out the culprit who caused her subconscious to play out the memories. She wondered if there was a memory fairy who bestowed powers of remembrance and familiarity to those who'd forgotten.

She vividly recalled a coloring contest she had won at Jack's age. When the store manager had announced her name on the microphone, Heather's legs had become wobbly and her heart pounded rapidly, each beat reminding her of the excitement of being singled out. As though her birth had been gifted with a genie that would bring her never-ending luck, Heather won every contest, raffle and game that came her way. She wished her good luck still felt so prevalent.

She remembered the feeling she'd gotten when she walked up to collect her prize. The memory was sweet until an unknown wave of sadness replaced it. Heather blinked her way back to reality.

She feared her boys would lose more innocence and more hope each year they lived. Watching the news or reading the paper any more was enough to send the average Joe in search of a razor blade. She felt powerless to keep them safe at every moment and cursed the fact she couldn't save her boys from the ugliness they were sure to face.

Another boy responded to Jack's challenge and proudly floated by on his back. Her son beamed proudly and Heather realized there was no envy present. He even congratulated the other kid on a job well done. Heather pictured them both ten years from that moment and imagined their attitudes toward each other would be different under the same circumstances. She wished she had more faith in the world.

"Can you dive?" Jack asked the boy.

His excitement buoyed her and she watched as the other kid, lost in a head of red freckles and hair, dove in. He looked up at Jack as though they were new best friends.

Never one to be outdone, Jack punctuated his previous dare with an upshoot of his arms before leaning forward and diving in.

Heather was off the lounge chair in a quick burst of contracted muscle, applauding for him proudly. More impressive was that he had only learned to swim three weeks before. As usual, her youngest child did things in his own time but he always managed to take it far beyond expectations.

Everyone in the vicinity applauded Jack. A guy standing at the opposite end of the pool clapped his hands louder than the rest of the crowd and Heather squinted against the sun to see him. She tried to decipher the features on his face but couldn't put them together enough to turn him into anyone recognizable. He remained nothing more than a blurry vision at the end of the pool.

All she could tell was that the appreciative stranger was drenched from head to toe and she assumed he'd just gotten out of the pool. Squinting only made him less visible and she would have lost interest if he hadn't continued to clap after everyone else stopped.

"Who's that, Mom?" asked Jack.

He looked puzzled as he pulled his small, wet body up to the side of the pool.

"I don't know, sweetie," she answered with a nervousness she refused to share.

The incessant applause suddenly stopped and Heather's head snapped upward, toward the loss of sound. She was more startled by the silence than she had been by the clapping. She discovered the man no longer stood in his previous spot and her heart began to palpitate. She reached into the water and pulled Jack out quickly before inhaling deeply. She didn't want to alert her son to the fact that she was close to hyper-ventilating. Suddenly, Heather had the uneasy sensation that going public had plunged them into vulnerability she hadn't foreseen.

She wrapped a towel around Jack's waist and tied it in a knot below his armpits before grabbing his hand. They walked faster than she planned as Heather practically dragged him to the bathrooms.

"Mom, that's the ladies' room. I can't go in there," he protested, mortified.

"Yes, you can honey; nobody will care," she answered gently. There was no time to deal with his embarrassment just then. Jack's safety was all she coveted at the moment.

"Please don't make me go in there," he whined. Heather ignored him and chanced a peek behind

them as they neared the locker room doors. Half expecting to find a man, soaking wet and insanely applauding, she braced herself. Though no one stood there, Heather still felt a presence. Someone was watching but she didn't know who it was or where they hid.

She pulled clumsily on the door handle and nudged Jack in ahead of her. Before she took her own step inside, Heather heard a voice right behind her.

"Excuse me, ma'am? Do you have the time?" a man asked.

Without waiting for the familiar voice to utter another syllable, Heather rushed forward without a plan. Still holding Jack's hand, she ran ahead of her son, pulling him behind her into the deserted bathroom. Heather miscalculated their speed and couldn't slow down enough to stop herself from crashing into the wall that separated the mirrors and the showers.

The wall was unforgiving in its painful reception. She heard the loud thud her body made when it slammed into the concrete and a scream escaped her throat as her tailbone took the brunt of her weight. Heather felt a fleeting sense of appreciation when she realized her son escaped harm because of a last minute maneuver. She let go of his hand and he missed his own collision by half an inch. Heather always feared failing her children in their most desperate hours but when it came down to it, she realized she always reacted in their best interests.

"Mom!" Jack screamed.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," she lied.

Heather's hand flew up to her left eyebrow and she felt a stickiness that hadn't been there before. She forced herself to look up at her reflection in the wall length mirror and noticed blood rushing from a new gash that ran from her eyebrow to her hairline.

"You're bleeding!" her son screamed.

His expression was a mixture of raw concern and mild horror. The throbbing pain in Heather's eyebrow didn't compare to her desperate need to remove the pained look from Jack's face.

"Look, baby," she said, forcing light humor into her tone. "It doesn't hurt at all. Watch this."

She looked back into the mirror and placed light pressure to the bottom of her wound. They both watched as blood began to ooze freely from the cut and Jack's expression contorted into one of stark terror. Heather grabbed a handful of toilet paper from the closest stall. She had planned to prove that her gash didn't hurt but had succeeded in freaking him out even more.

Heather played with the idea of using the moment to teach him how to numb out pain but decided against it. Heather realized the lesson was possibly more damaging. As much as it hurt her, her sons needed to experience pain so they could grow to appreciate their usual lack of pain. It was a shitty balance but one that couldn't be ignored.

Heather thought she would crumble into a sniveling mess when Jack kissed his fingers, leaned in and touched them to her face. He was mimicking his mother's actions to his own boo boos and Heather wondered if he would copy her words as well. He seemed unaffected by the blood on his fingers and he made direct eye contact when he spoke to her.

"Okay, there you go," he said gently. "That kiss should take about five minutes to work."

Jack's intense stare told her that he was feeling brave and his rigid posture spoke of the protective feelings he had for her. His soft expression said that he loved her.

"God, I love you so much," she blurted out, unaware the words had even formed inside her head yet.

Heather realized the locker room was unusually quiet and wondered where all of the gossipy women and their noisy little girls were. It was only then she remembered why they had been running in the first place and she quickly pulled herself upright.

Heather's eyes darted from the entrance to the exit. She ignored the blood that threatened to blur her vision if she didn't wipe it away immediately.

"Let's go, baby," she said to Jack, trying to hide the quiver in her voice.

She grabbed his hand and faced the entrance door hesitantly. It seemed like a smarter choice as it led to the group rooms and was likely to be more congested with health nuts leaving their yoga and nutrition classes.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Jack said, pulling his hand from hers.

Heather fought the urge to pick him up and run with him through the doors. She had already bloodied her face and risked injury to her child running from a man because he clapped for too long and asked her for the time. If she gave into the paranoia that threatened to control their movements, Heather knew she would be less aware and less prepared when a real threat was present.

"Okay, honey, go!" she said, scooting him toward the closest toilet. She closed the door and

decided she had neglected her own bladder for too long.

Opting for the stall next to his, Heather walked inside and began singing him a song about a kid who peed soda. Her chest muscles started to relax when she heard him laughing and she reminded herself to stay calm for his sake. When she heard one of the outer doors creak open, Heather stopped her song mid-lyric.

“Mom?” Jack asked.

The panic in his voice was impossible to miss. “Ssh!” she answered.

Heather strained her ears for voices and prayed to hear the usual complaints about aching muscles but she heard nothing. The silence didn’t make sense as someone had obviously come in.

She felt the same heavy presence that she had outside the locker room and the only thoughts that hadn’t been suspended were the ones that told her to climb beneath the wall and protect her child. The thought of Jack struggling alone with fear was unacceptable to her.

Wet feet slapped against the tiled floor only feet away and Heather imagined whoever it was now stood before the closest wall of mirrors. There was no whir of a blow dryer coming to life and there were no groans from a hairbrush getting entangled in wet scalp. Heather thought it was strange that the lack of sound could be so noisy.

Her bladder froze and her need to use the toilet disappeared. She pulled her jeans up roughly but didn’t fasten them. Instead, she bent down to the bottom of the wall that separated her from Jack. Heather heard footsteps getting closer and fought against the instinct to kneel down and pull her son into her stall by his ankles. She was afraid to make eye contact with the monster on the other side of the doors and felt as long as she didn’t look into his eyes, they still had a chance.

Instead of slithering under the stalls herself, she shoved her hands under the wall and motioned for Jack to come to her.

“Mom, what are you doing?” he asked laughing.

Heather fought between two powerful needs. She wanted to keep Jack laughing so that her enemy wouldn’t realize they’d been alerted to his presence. She also wanted for him to stay quiet so that she could pinpoint their intruder’s whereabouts.

“Come here, honey. I want to play a game. Just take my hands and lower yourself down. Crawl into my stall,” she directed. She spoke in a half whisper and worked hard to control the panic that threatened to maim her voice box.

“Did you hear someone, Mom?” Jack asked. His tone wasn’t as playful as before. All she wanted was for him to be with her inside her stall before shoes appeared beneath the door.

“People come in and out, honey,” she whispered loudly. “It’s a public bathroom; now, take my hands.”

Heather felt her son’s warm hands grabbing onto hers and she longed to hold him. From

her position on her knees, she guided Jack downwards and helped lower him to the floor. When he was lying on his side, he peeked up at her.

Footsteps started making their way toward them. To protect Jack from turning to face the lower half of a monster, she made funny faces at him. He wiggled as she helped maneuver him from his floor to hers.

As Jack began to rise to his height, Heather saw the feet appear on the other side of the door. She stifled the instinct to scream but noticed that Jack was just as aware of their visitor as she was. Heather mimicked a shushing motion but didn't include the usual sound effect.

She pulled Jack to her and closed her eyes tightly. When she felt him press his face against her stomach, her arms enclosed him and she kissed the top of his head leaving a drop of blood in one of his black curls.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" came the familiar voice right outside the thin door.

The chill that froze her in her spot had nothing to do with the fear of any danger to herself. Heather worried only about what intentions the stranger might have with her child. She shoved her hands beneath Jack's armpits and stood him up on the back of the toilet in reaction to the vision she had of a hand pushing itself underneath the door. Heather moved to block the toilet on which her son stood.

"What do you want?" she called out in a raspy voice.

"Do you happen to have the time?" he asked. She could hear the amusement in his tone.

His southern drawl made her envision a large, grinning mouth without many teeth and she feared answering him almost as much as she feared not answering him.

Jack whispered behind her.

"That's a man, Mom."

Laughter erupted from the other side of the door and Heather watched as Jack's expression fell. He knew something was very wrong.

She darted her eyes around nervously and her glance fell on her purse still sitting by her feet. She wondered if their guest would pluck her hand from its wrist before she had the chance to pull anything out. Not sure whether to pray for a cell phone or a steak knife, Heather closed her eyes and wished for both.

Deciding that inaction was their enemy, she reached out and snatched the purse off the floor. She shoved her arm inside and felt around with panicked fingers. The laughter stopped abruptly as Heather grasped and released several different items in her frantic search for anything useful.

The door handle began to turn but its mission halted when the latch caught itself in the lock. Attempts became louder and Heather realized that the stranger's efforts had gotten increasingly aggressive. The door began to shake under the pressure of the fists that pounded on it. Heather looked at Jack just as her fingers wrapped themselves around her

cell phone.

Although shaking almost to the point of uselessness, Heather still managed to press the button that would call the front desk of the recreation center. Luckily, she had programmed the number into her telephone when checking into membership fees a week earlier.

“Body Salon. How can I help you?” asked a soft female voice. Heather knew it belonged to the petite blonde who greeted customers out front.

“I’m in your bathroom by the basketball court right now,” Heather’s whisper through clenched teeth turned quickly into a scream. “Someone is trying to attack us. Come to the bathroom!”

“Is this a joke?” the blonde asked playfully.

“No, help us!” Heather screamed. She got even more nervous after hearing the sound of her own voice. It reminded her of a horror movie she had once seen where the girl’s throat was slashed a short time later. Even the dumb receptionist couldn’t miss the grave sound in Heather’s voice.

“Okay, ma’am, it’s all right,” she said more softly. After another five seconds of rustling noises and background chatter, the woman at the front continued. “I just sent the security guard to the bathrooms. He’s on his way to you right now, okay?”

Heather hit the speaker button so the monster had fair warning about the cavalry on its way.

“Please repeat that!” she screamed into the speaker.

“I said we just sent the security guard to the bathrooms. He should be to you any minute now,” the woman comforted.

Heather let the phone hang by her side. She refused to disconnect the call because she knew she might need the ditzy blonde as a witness later on. At the thought of there being something to witness, Heather decided silence was in their best interest until help arrived.

She’d never have guessed that a fantasy of the doughy rent-a-cop bursting through the door with his gun drawn would ever be a drug free thought in her head. Heather didn’t know if he were up to the task or if he would bail on them when he passed the snack machine in the hallway but she subconsciously placed him in a heroic role just the same. Luckily, their guest wasn’t as curious about what would happen next because he stopped shaking the door and his feet disappeared.

She wasn’t sure how much time had gone by when they heard the entrance door slam open and crash into the inner wall. Heather and Jack both jumped and she had to quickly block the toilet to prevent her son from falling off.

She gave Jack her best attempt at a smile but was pretty sure by his startled reaction that it came out as more of a frightening grimace. She put a finger to her lips again to let him know that it wasn’t safe to talk yet.

“Hello? Is anyone in here?” It was the hesitant voice of the guard.

Heather disengaged the stall lock and pushed on the door so fast that she was forced into a stumble. She staggered out of the stall like a wino at the end of his bottle.

“What the Hell?” asked the guard.

He stood there watching her dramatic exit and Heather almost laughed from relief. When she regained her footing, she focused on the pudgy face staring back at her from the doorway. He continued to stand still, holding a flashlight in one hand and a two way radio in the other. Heather wondered which one he had planned to use if there was an attack.

Heather realized, by the look on the guard’s face, that she still had blood gushing from her forehead and turned toward the mirror to see what he was looking at.

“Oh my God,” she muttered at her reflection.

Blood trickled down from her forehead and the bleeding had worsened throughout her time in the stall. The sight was horrendous and reminded her of another scene from the same horror movie

Thick, dark blood traveled over her eyebrows, through her eyelashes and down her nose. Streaks combined with sweat and together, they forked off from the original bloodline, creating different pathways. Heather looked as though she had been pummeled with a tire iron and quickly tried to reassure the guard who looked close to passing out.

The blonde from the front desk was in tow and she showed more balls than the hesitant guard. The small woman rushed to the sinks where she dampened several paper towels that she used to wipe the blood from Heather’s eyes. When the receptionist saw the stalls reflected in the mirror, she noticed Jack standing atop the commode.

“Hi, sweetie,” she said gently. “Come here.”

She offered a hand but Jack ignored it. He jumped down from the toilet and walked straight over to his mother. Heather felt his hand into hers and she smiled because he was safe.

After discovering that Heather’s injuries were selfinduced, neither the guard nor the blonde gave much credence to her story of an attacker. They had no choice but to believe her version of the events since they were corroborated by a seven year old, but they chalked it up to something less menacing. They believed she had overreacted to a man who had gotten lost.

Police weren’t notified since no crime actually occurred. The intruder hadn’t done anything more dangerous than enter the ladies room and the employees were convinced Heather’s paranoia and over-reaction was the real problem. When she asked why their innocent guy disappeared, they told her he’d probably left, embarrassed after finding himself in the wrong bathroom.

The staff bandaged her cut and advised her to go to the hospital for stitches and then the security guard escorted them to their car. Heather had the feeling he would have led them out with the same eagerness even if they hadn’t been ready and willing to leave.

Her eyes became beacons as she shot anxious looks in every direction. She just wanted to get both of her boys safely into the car. Heather flipped open her cell phone and dialed Tommy's number as she pulled out of the recreation center's front lot. Turning five sentences into one, she told him she would pick him up in a matter of seconds.

"We're going to your dad's," she added quickly.

Chapter 9

Gone Away

Damon and his brother Jeff sold the house and land their parents had left behind. Heather's first ex-husband had given her a large sum of money and she had used most of it to move the boys and herself into their dream home. She remained grateful that Damon loved them enough to help them and thankful that her realtor, a family friend, agreed to a lease option. Heather had started believing things would be all right; at least until recent events.

She never understood why people threw away their failed relationships and she believed wholeheartedly in the power of her self-proclaimed "sliver system." It was a concept she had worked out for herself and explained to Dr. Angel many years before. It was her rule book and her self-discipline in the shape of a pie. The slivers represented the men she placed in each slice. No slice was allowed to have more than one topping. She couldn't cuddle her lover and she couldn't have deep talks with the family man. The slivers were all segregated and allowed only one task. Should they try to cross over or demand more toppings, they would be immediately ejected from the pie.

Her doctor didn't believe her system to be necessarily healthy and had tried to help her integrate her slivers. He tried to tell her she didn't have to have sex with one and then wait to cuddle the next. He told her she could have both needs met in one man. Heather had to explain she was well aware she could have it all in one. It was that she didn't want to have it. She knew what came of it. The cheating and the abuse and the pain wasn't worth it in the end so she kept them all at a safe distance from one another, as well as from herself.

Because of her doctor's interference, Heather no longer had a sliver system. She had systematically shut it down as she matured and grew and learned to nurture the healthy parts of herself but Heather missed her slivers. The only one she'd held onto was the lover and he was the first one she should have let go of.

Neither Joey nor Damon was meant to be her husband but she had always known they were intended to play significant roles in her life. The fact they fathered her sons told her they were meant to be a part of her forever, so she kept them. She held onto her first love just as tightly. If her heart were an office building, each of the men would have his own wing.

If she closed her eyes and let herself imagine them as they were, she could feel the same rush of love she felt while she was with them. Because her heart was still burdened by her love for them, she allowed them all to rent the space in her heart. With each man, she carved out a different type of relationship she felt they could better handle.

Heather went to Damon's with the boys. She needed to feel safe and his place was where her car drove them. Damon wasn't home yet so she grabbed his extra set of keys from its hiding spot behind a bush and walked in ahead of Jack and Tommy. When they weren't looking, she grabbed a long knife from its slot in the kitchen and headed toward the back rooms.

Pretending to go through closets in search of wrapping paper, Heather searched each room for an intruder with a southern drawl. Each time she pulled open a closed door, she pulled the blade back into attack mode. When she found no uninvited guests, she headed out to the back patio.

The back porch was enclosed and offered shade from the sun and cover from the rain. The large pool was covered by an outer screen. Heather had spent many nights on Damon's patio over the past twenty years and had always appreciated that he shared his childhood home and his parents with her.

Damon's parents had quickly become her own surrogate mother and father during her troubled teenage years. She had experienced confusion and angst and had found escape in their welcoming home. Their broad shoulders and patient words of advice had healed her on so many different occasions.

Heather called them Carolyn and Mickey for two years. Then they became Granny and Grampy and became a part of her family. Heather missed them desperately but still felt they were close by.

"Hey," Damon said from behind her.

Heather screamed and jumped. She almost smacked him in the face but recoiled in time.

When he saw her mangled eye, Damon almost screamed himself.

"What the Hell happened?" he yelled.

"You should see the other guy," Heather said as she searched for a lie.

"I'm not kidding, Heather. What happened? Where are the boys?"

"Oh, right. Like if something had happened to them, I wouldn't have told you by now?"

She was trying to buy time. She hadn't heard him pull up and still didn't know how much to tell him. If he were to help her protect the boys, he would have to know at least some of the truth. He just stared at her angrily while he waited for her first tale.

"I had an accident," she said.

"A car accident?"

"No. More like a locker room accident," she replied flatly.

"If you don't tell me within ten seconds, I'm going to find the boys and let them tell me."

"Okay, okay," she said, exasperated, and she told him.

She shared the story about the man who applauded Jack's swimming tricks and then followed her into the ladies' room. She told him about the guy who followed her through the parking garage and then disappeared into thin air. She told him about her fear for the boys and her need for Damon to help her keep them safe. Heather stopped talking only before blurting out her belief that the recent thunderstorms were a communication from God

and that He was warning them all of impending danger.

Damon responded with his typical combination of skepticism and empathy. Mostly, he was worried about their safety and tried to forbid Heather to go back home. She compromised and said she'd let the boys stay with him but that she needed to be in her own place. Heather was the target and as long as the boys were in her presence, they were in greater danger.

After ironing out plans and schedules, the ex-spouses sat back to smoke a cigarette and drink a beer together. Heather noticed Damon was staring out into the massive field behind his house and figured he was probably trying to freeze frame the memory before he picked up and moved out the following month.

She knew he was thinking about his parents and she wished she could make his pain go away. As angry as she became with her own parents at times, she couldn't imagine losing either one of them. Heather sometimes felt that death was God's biggest mistake and she silently cursed Him for allowing humanity to know such loss. When she gave it deeper thought, she changed her mind, deciding that endless life was even more terrifying than one interrupted. During those moments, she thanked God for being insightful enough to have given them the gift of an ending.

Carolyn and Mickey both died of heart attacks only six short months apart. Heather had been in her office both times when Damon's frantic phone call sent her racing down the street at ninety miles an hour. She held him up during the rescue attempts made by paramedics. Later, she walked with him through the funeral parlor to pick out caskets. At the funerals, she stood by his side and held his hand tightly. Damon was one of her closest friends and she knew when the time came, he would do the same for her.

"Do you ever think that maybe they're still here?" Heather asked.

"No," Damon answered as he shook his head firmly.

He had given up his belief in God right after his mother told him she was scared and cold and fell out of her wheelchair. When he was unable to revive the pile of lifelessness lying at his feet that had once been his mom, Damon decided there was no such thing as God.

"I know you don't," she said. "I do, though. And I think they're here."

She shrugged and changed the subject before he became excited about his newfound atheism and decided to recruit her.

"Anyway," he started by way of a subject change. "Should we talk to the boys about what's going on?"

"No," Heather answered without hesitation. "I don't want to scare them."

She refused to share information that would make them nervous. She had to find a way to keep them safe and unaware of her concerns all at the same time.

Keeping things from Tommy had become more difficult than in the past. He was more

intuitive and he picked up on moods the way she had as a child. Heather wondered why her kids were so determined to only inherit her burdensome traits.

She smiled at Tommy through the window and he waved back. He was sitting on the couch watching television dressed in his usual jeans and T-shirt ensemble. By the way he laughed, she guessed he was watching Family Guy.

When he felt them looking at him, Tommy stood up and walked outside. He towered over Heather as she sat in her chair and it made her laugh. She still denied it out loud but Tommy had grown past her a good year before. When she yelled at him or tried to discipline him, she often felt foolish looking up into his eyes instead of downwards like she used to.

A warm and familiar rush of love spread through her and she silently agreed that her friends were right. He really was identical to a young Jim Morrison. Tommy sat down beside his father and he met their eyes.

“What’s up?” Heather asked him.

“Nothing, I just thought I’d hang out with you guys.”

She knew it was a lie. The real reason for his company was that he was picking up on trouble.

“Everything’s okay,” she said too soon.

“Yeah, I can tell,” he said, staring at her facial injuries. “Your eyebrow’s bleeding again, by the way.”

Tommy’s sarcasm was usually fun but not at the moment. She couldn’t fault him though. He came by his sense of humor naturally.

Heather thought that if her children were a representation of her, they spoke well of her character. One needed only to observe the empathy and humor of her older son and the kindness and depth of her little one to know she was more equipped to parent than she gave herself credit for.

Through both her achievements and her mistakes, she had raised them to be happy, well-adjusted and loving kids. She had no doubt they would be remarkable men, supportive husbands and protective fathers and she often told them so.

Heather stood up and walked over to Tommy’s chair. He looked up as a blast of thunder marked the moment. She pulled him out of his chair and put her head on his chest as she hugged him.

“When did you get taller than me?” she asked.

His hair fell over his right eye and he flung his head to the side to brush it away. “About a year ago,” he answered.

“What happened” Jack asked, running out the back door. He had come to ask his brother a video game question when he noticed the embrace. His little arms enclosed his mom and brother as he joined them. Only Heather’s children could touch her on a level so deep.

“I was just telling Tommy how much I love you guys,” she answered. She didn’t want to make him worry and knew he would easily believe she had simply been professing her love.

He rested his head on her hip and Heather wondered if there was a better feeling in the entire universe.

Later that evening, before she headed for home, Heather went into the room Jack slept in and stared at him for awhile. He was sprawled out across his bed in red pajama bottoms and Spiderman top. Jack often dressed backwards like his mother, and never seemed to notice when his outfits were mismatched or inside out.

He looked comfortable and she hoped he was having good dreams. Heather focused on his face, remembering the first time she’d ever seen it. His big brown eyes, the dark curls and the rosy cheeks were still the same.

He had fallen asleep less than an hour before and his sleepiness had left him helpless to resist conversation about himself. He didn’t brush off her questions and he didn’t insist to his mother that she “get out of his mind” as he usually did.

“How was your day?” she had asked as she climbed into bed beside him.

She had pulled the comforter over them as her intermittent giggles hinted at either a playful mood or a delirious state of mind.

“Fine, but I’m worried,” he answered frowning.

“About what, honey?” she asked as she wrapped a runaway curl around his ear. She wondered what a seven year old could worry about that would prevent sleep.

“I’m afraid for my face to be old,” he finished.

Heather didn’t know where the statement had come from and her brain sent out thousands of messages in search of a decent response. She still felt good that her decision to stay quiet and listen for awhile was the right one. The act armed her with the knowledge she needed so she could continue making sense to such an intricate little mind.

As the talk progressed, Heather discovered her son’s real fear was that he would look into the mirror one day and discover he had aged overnight. Looking back at a newly wrinkled and decrepit old man had apparently become his worst fear

Heather tried to describe the gradual aging process and to convince Jack that time would never be so sudden. It took some work but he seemed to understand what she was saying.

She was no stranger to difficult childhood questions. Both wise beyond their years, her sons had challenged her to many desperate dictionary searches and hours of theological research.

“I’m afraid to be different, mom,” he said.

She pulled him into her arms and held him without speaking for a minute. After a quick succession of kisses on the top of his head, she finally responded.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I want to be the same as everyone else. I don’t want to be different,” he insisted.

She could almost see his aura darken and she had to tell herself it was just a play of lights. Her immediate reaction was to tell him that being different was a good thing but she knew he was more stubborn than that and that she needed to be careful. If she presented it the wrong way, he’d take the opposite stance just for the sake of a good argument.

“I always liked being different,” she said simply.

Heather punctuated her statement with a quick shrug that she hoped would exacerbate the nonchalance she was trying to pull off.

Jack scrunched his nose and offered a dimpled smile that turned him into a clone of his father.

“Why?” he asked with genuine surprise.

“Being the same as everyone else is boring. There, I said it.”

Heather winked so that Jack felt as though she had just included him in a well-guarded secret.

“Yeah, but Mom,” he continued.

She couldn’t help but smile. It was the way he started every conversation with her and it cracked up her up every time.

Yeah, but Mom . . .

“Mom, do you think I’ll come back as a girl the next time?” Jack asked.

She was proud of him in that moment. His insight was unbelievable and his instinct was even more incredible. She looked into his eyes and saw they were opened wide with expectancy of her answer. She questioned the openness she shared with her boys but only for a moment. She was more afraid of raising them under the oppressive fear that had been bestowed on her and her sisters. Disguised as respect for the church, their teachings had only served to scare and depress them.

Heather had always believed in reincarnation and had shared that belief with her children. She also shared the Christian beliefs of her family, and those that she learned of the Jews, and of the Muslims, and of the Catholics. She had advised them to accept the different beliefs whether they subscribed to them or not. She had told the boys to let life, experience and instinct guide the decisions they would ultimately make for themselves.

“I honestly don’t know, honey,” she said. “Maybe it depends on what lesson you’d be coming back to learn. If the lesson requires you to be a girl, I don’t think you’ll even know the difference.”

“Why not?”

“Because you won’t remember having ever been a boy,” she said, and prayed the conversation wouldn’t scar him for life.

“If I don’t remember I’m a boy, how will I remember you?” he asked.

His expression was half hopeful and half terrified at the thought of not remembering his own mother. He had no intention of letting the conversation drop until she convinced him that his destiny wouldn’t require a gender change.

“Honey, I think whatever other lives await you will be the right ones but it also won’t be for a very long time. I also think we find each other, again and again. I may not be your mom in your next life but I’ll definitely be there.”

“What if I’m your mom?” he asked with a smile. He seemed pleased with the idea of being the one in control.

“Anything’s possible, babe. But for now, you have a long life ahead of you and that’s all you need to concentrate on.”

She kissed his nose and forehead and ran her fingers once more through his curls.

“I’m not tired,” he complained, as he yawned and put his head back against the pillow.

“No?” she asked.

She grinned and pulled the covers up right below his chin. After planting a kiss on his lips, she said, “I think maybe you just don’t want to go to sleep.”

“No way, lady,” he objected sleepily.

Heather had laughed. Jack was such a funny kid. Heather wished she could jump into his dreams to find out what had been haunting him lately. Nightmares woke him up abruptly, sweating, shaking and crying. The only cure was when Heather enfolded him in her arms and lay beside him long after he’d fallen into a sound sleep.

All he’d ever said about the nightmares was that monsters were coming after him. He said he couldn’t fight back because he had no weapons. Skilled at utilizing whatever information was handy, Heather decided to experiment with a new idea before he fell out.

“I have something very important for you,” she had said as she wore her most serious expression. “It’s something I think you’re old enough for now.”

Unable to contain his curiosity, Jack sat up straight. “What?” he asked.

“I have the weapons you need,” she whispered. “Where?” Jack whispered.

She held up a closed fist but remained mysterious about its contents.

“They’re in here,” she continued. “We have to implant them behind your ear but I need to know you can handle this responsibility.”

He answered without hesitation.

“I want an oozie and a machete and a knife and a gun and a grenade,” he answered excitedly.

She told him to list them again slowly and as he named each weapon, Heather made a show of implanting them behind his ear. She warned him to be careful with such great power and, though a part of him didn't believe his mother, the part that wanted to believe won over. He accepted the weapons eagerly and agreed to bring them into his dreams in case the monsters came back.

Heather said a silent prayer that Jack's subconscious mind was powerful enough that her plan worked. She lay beside him and listened closely to his breathing as he slept. She put a hand to his heart to make sure it was still beating and was hit with a memory of the daughter whose heart refused to beat. Exhausted, she closed her eyes and gave into the sleep that beckoned her as well.

Chapter 10

Lightning Crashes

As she lay next to Jack, Heather felt her mind and body shut down. Her defenses weakened under the lure of slumber and visions of her lost daughter filled her brain. She didn't want to bring the memory into her dreams with her. If she fell asleep thinking about the loss, the bad thoughts would attach themselves to her brain like unwanted barnacles.

Heather knew that losing a child could only happen as punishment for some horrible sin she had committed. God knew how she loved all children and how she lived to protect them. She had even turned it into a full-fledged career.

Nothing and nobody would ever convince Heather that she wasn't to blame for her daughter's death. She had taken good care of her pregnancy so she knew it wasn't a physical sin she'd committed. Heather decided the loss was retribution for some horrid crime she'd committed against the spiritual world.

Memories of the tiny soul whose life and death took place within two short hours teased her nerves. In her vulnerable sleep state, the mental doors that usually remained tightly closed creaked open. They overpowered her natural ability to numb out feelings and blur out thoughts.

She could still see the doctors rushing in and out of her hospital room and could still hear the beeping of machines. The voices of the medical staff were unmistakably urgent as panic took over her hospital room.

Heather could still see the perfectly formed body of her tiny daughter. The child had opened her mouth to cry but no sound came out. Above all else, it was the part that broke Heather's heart. The soreness in her vagina and the emptiness in her womb had taken a back seat to the sadness she felt for her broken baby with lungs that didn't work.

The twenty-five hour labor had ended in silence. The face of her obstetrician floated above her, his features appearing to her a blurry mask. The sedatives and pain medications pumped into her throughout the night had Heather struggling to keep her eyes open. Hard as she fought not to, she had passed out after holding her baby for just a second or two.

For years, Heather cursed the exhaustion that had overtaken her. She believed it to be the ultimate nail in her daughter's coffin. Had she not fallen asleep, the nurse wouldn't have been able to rock her into an endless sleep and Heather's love as her mother may have magically worked to save her life.

"This is a really shitty event," her doctor had said sadly.

As unprofessional as it sounded, the words were sincere and heartfelt. Heather had prayed fervently for God to spare her unborn child and when He hadn't, had envisioned an angry entity bringing vengeance down upon her.

Her minister, Pastor Eric, had stopped in to visit with her in the hospital room and to pray with her. She remembered the sadness in his eyes when he looked down into the tiny, empty crib. She had never even been able to kiss her daughter on the head and place her in the bassinet beside her.

“Why does God hate me?” she had cried.

“He doesn’t hate you, Heather. He loves you very much,” her pastor had answered.

“Then why did He let this happen?”

“You know the answer to that,” he answered.

“Oh right, free will. I almost forgot what a gift that was,” she said bitterly.

“Free will is a gift,” he said gently.

“Oh, a gift!’ she bit back. “That must be why it feels so good.”

“Free will doesn’t always feel good. It can lead to the worst pain imaginable,” he shook his head. “Like this.”

“I think I’d give up free will right now if it meant holding my baby for five more minutes.”

“But then you wouldn’t be a real mother to her. You would just be a robot. Is that what you would want?” he had asked her.

“Yes! I would become a robot to get her back!’ she screamed.

Heather woke up beside Jack, screaming. She cut it off quickly so she wouldn’t wake everyone else but she couldn’t cut off the tears. She lay in bed, cuddling her healthy seven-year-old son and crying for the daughter she had never been able to bring home.

Chapter 11

Strawberry Fields

Heather's stress didn't escape her sister's attention and Jade insisted she leave the boys with their mother to go out for a beer. Heather didn't want to leave the boys anywhere but still felt her presence was their weakness so she agreed to go. Besides, the thought of alcohol sounded great.

She kissed Tommy and Jack goodbye and headed to Joey's karaoke show at Beer Belly's. What had begun as a three-week gig for her second husband had turned into a full-fledged career and Heather credited herself with his success because she'd gotten him the first job.

His show was largely successful due to her exhusband's ability to make his customers feel good about themselves. His singers felt like stars on his stage and they admired him as if he were their own personal piano man. Joey thought he was saving the world one karaoke show at a time and in a weird way, Heather realized he was probably right.

His fans left the show feeling better than they did before braving the microphone. He had a natural way of entertaining people, of helping them connect to an audience despite their insecurities. Heather used to wish his power to make people feel good had extended itself to their marriage but it was a hope she no longer indulged in. Their marriage was over and had become irretrievable. The best she could hope for was a solid friendship and a strong co-parent for Jack.

The major downfall of their marriage had been Heather's ability to look at the world as a vast place filled with endless possibilities compared to his own view from within his suffocating bubble. She thought he gave up on things too easily and he hated her for pointing it out to him all the time. They had both crossed the boundaries with cruel words and vengeance long before but fortunately, had come full circle into a new friendship. Heather and Joey had never lacked the ability to have fun together and she decided there was no reason to give up on the best parts of their relationship just because their marriage didn't work.

The bitterness over their past had gradually disintegrated over the two years since their divorce and Heather was still testing the waters of their evolved relationship.

Heather followed her pregnant sister through the crowded pub and straight to the bar. Jade, a serious partier before her pregnancy, had never been a baby about being in a smoky bar. Now, as she neared her due date, almost everything made her sick. Heather prayed there was one smoke-free area left in the bar. The last thing she needed to deal with was a pile of vomit in her lap.

Heather struggled against the urge to rush home to her boys. She knew instinctively her presence was more dangerous to them than anything else. Even if she were wrong, she chanced screwing them up by making them victims of her insecurities and paranoia. She had to keep reminding herself they were safer at home than anywhere with her.

Heather made eye contact with Joey and she winked at him. He was plugging his equipment in and hooking speakers up for the show. Familiar voices called out to her from the crowd and she waved back at old acquaintances she and Joey had collected together during the marriage. She hadn't seen them for a few months and she enjoyed the comfortable banter customary among karaoke crowds.

Once at the bar, Jade ordered an ice water and Heather asked for a Long Island iced tea. Dolly was behind the bar and when she saw them, she blew a kiss mid-pour as she continued to tend to the obnoxious drunks in her section. When she was finished coddling an old drunk who kept falling out of his chair, the compassionate bartender walked up to her favorite pair of sisters. She gave them rushed hellos and quick hugs before returning to her customers. When Heather turned to face Jade, she discovered her sister was no longer beside her. She craned her neck behind her and saw that Jade had already commandeered a booth.

Joey approached the booth and leaned in to drop a kiss onto Heather's waiting cheek. He looked at Jade and delivered a strained hello to the woman he once thought of as part of the opposing enemy camp. His mouth told Jade hello but his eyes screamed "*Don't hit me.*"

Jade smiled warmly at him and hugged him back. The hard feelings were gone and she looked at him with love and admiration. Heather noticed that Jade didn't seem to have a problem with him anymore either. As a matter of fact, her little sister didn't seem to have an issue with anyone anymore. Heather didn't understand gestational kindness because her own pregnancies had provided her with a generalized hatred of humankind.

"Hey Joey, what's up?" Jade asked.

"Well, you know," he started as he glanced around at the growing line of singers. "You pretty much see it," he finished.

"Are you taking care of our tab tonight?" Heather asked him too soon. She realized she hadn't even said hello yet but it was too late to change her order of priorities since she'd already verbalized them. Instead, she batted her eyelashes and tossed in her best pout for added measure. Though she tried not to make a habit of extorting money through guilt, Heather never felt bad asking Joey to pay her check. She still felt that he owed her a lot and she planned to collect her due, one Long Island iced tea at a time.

He stared at her for a moment and Heather was relieved that mental telepathy was impossible. She knew if he tried to refuse, he'd crumble within three seconds so she counted down as she waited for a response.

"Fine," he finally answered. "I'll tell Dolly to put your tab under my name."

Even though he followed his statement with an eye roll, Heather noticed the tugging at his upper lip. She knew he was happy she'd come to see him and as much as he hated to spend his money, she knew he'd rather spend it and be in her presence than deny her and see her leave. Heather hoped that didn't make her shallow or manipulative but was pretty sure it made her both.

“Hang on, I have to cue up the first song,” he said rushing away. “I’ll be back in a few.”

Before making his getaway, Joey looked down at Jade’s swollen belly and advised her to start eating before she withered away.

“Hey, wow, you’re funny,” Jade said.

It was the same light banter they had shared before Joey became the family villain. In the past, Jade found it difficult to forgive his treatment of her big sister and Heather had hoped the time since the divorce had been long enough for her family to lick their wounds as well. Both of Heather’s marriages had been so chaotic and volatile that they affected her family and friends almost as much as they had affected her.

Joey walked away and Jade stared at her without a word.

“What?” Heather asked defensively.

“You do know you’re not married anymore, right?” Jade asked.

“Of course. I’m not married to Damon anymore either but I hang out with him too.”

“Yeah, thanks for making my point for me, psychopath,” Jade said. She was smiling so Heather knew she meant no ill will.

“What point, stupid?” Heather asked.

She had decided it wouldn’t be fair to let Jade be the only one who stooped to name-calling.

“Uh, why do you spend so much time with your exhusbands maybe?” asked Jade.

Heather counted on her fingers dramatically.

“Let’s see. Because I love them, because I have fun with them, because they help me, because they’re good fathers,” she ranted, mildly annoyed. “Duh,” she added for good measure.

Jade started to respond and Heather spoke louder, until her voice drowned out her sister’s.

“I see no reason to discard them because we failed at marriage when I could keep them as friends. That’s asinine and doesn’t make sense and people who think that way are ridiculous,” Heather finally finished. Realizing how defensive she’d become, she stuck her tongue out at Jade.

“Yeah. Real glad we didn’t hit a nerve or anything,” Jade teased.

“Bite me.”

“Are you gonna sing?” Heather asked, forcing a subject change. “Do *Eternal Flame!*” she commanded.

Jade knew the Bangles hit her sister mentioned. Heather made her sing it every time they were within a mile of a microphone.

“No way,” Jade teased.

“Please?”

Heather had always been proud of her little sister’s melodic voice. She wished Jade had remained close to the business and felt the world was a lesser place for not being exposed to her amazing voice. Jade was working as a starving band promoter at the inception of her pregnancy and she’d had to walk away from it for awhile.

“I don’t know, Heather,” Jade answered as her fingers ran like a spider toward the closest song book. She wrote out a slip while she blocked Heather’s attempts to peek at it by covering the small paper with both hands. When Heather tried to look over her sister’s arm, Jade jammed her fingers into Heather’s thigh. She knew it was Heather’s ticklish spot and that distracting her would buy her the minute she needed to run the slip up to Joey. Jade handed the slip to her ex-brother-in-law and turned around to shoot Heather a bird.

“Remember, I’ll always be stronger than you,” Jade sang to Heather as she ran past on the way to the ladies room.

It was true. Although younger, Jade had always been physically stronger than Heather. Their eldest sister, Lisa, was the strongest of all three and the thought made Heather fall into a memory of the drunken wrestling match her sisters got into a couple years before. Heather had been the photographer to her sisters’ backyard debacle. It was one of the few good memories she allowed herself to keep of their recent reunions with Lisa. She could still hear their squeals of laughter as the three sisters let go of resentment and pain for one night.

“Where’d you go?” Jade asked. She had returned from the bathroom and was yelling over the music.

Heather tried to grab hold of the last remnant of the happy memory as it slipped away.

“I was in Lisa’s backyard,” she said.

“Drunken wrestling?” Jade asked.

Heather nodded.

They both shared the annoying habit of drifting off into different thoughts, despite whatever conversation they happened to be in the middle of. Whether it came as a memory, a fantasy or a deep thought, both went into an almost trancelike state when it took hold.

Jade giggled. “Yeah, that was fun.”

“So what are you singing?” Heather asked. She was trying to divert both of their attention away from thoughts of the sister who hated them. “*Killing Me Softly?*”

“No.”

“*Gimme One Reason?*” Heather tried again.

“No.”

“*Somethin’ to Talk About?*”

“No,” Jade answered again.

“Do you plan on telling me the answer at the end of this fun game?” Heather asked.

“No, not really,” Jade answered smiling.

“Okay. Well as exciting as it’s been so far, I have to pee so I’ll be right back,” Heather said as she stood up.

She looked to the other side of the bar toward the location of the bathrooms. She dreaded walking through the game room but there was no other way to get to there. Drunken men with pool sticks tended to make Heather nervous but her bladder forced her to bite the bullet. She walked through the crowd with her head held high.

After finishing her business in the stall, Heather stopped at the mirror for a quick touch up. She washed her hands and held them under the burning hot dryer for as long as they could take it and then she pulled her heavy black purse off of her shoulder and dropped it into the sink. She pulled it back out just as quickly so that she could make sure the faucets weren’t automatic. It was a lesson she once learned the hard way in the courthouse bathroom.

She patted a powder puff onto her face haphazardly before applying a fresh coat of shiny bronze lipstick. Browns always looked best against her light skin. After wiping the remaining lipstick off her front teeth, Heather zipped her purse and turned to leave. She stopped abruptly and stared nervously into the mirror as her heart pounded out a scary tune. Something was wrong but she couldn’t explain to herself what it had been.

Her eyes remained focused on her own reflection as she maintained an unwavering showdown with herself. She tried to reconcile in her mind what she had just seen and realized her vocabulary didn’t possess a helpful explanation.

Heather paid the same subconscious amount of attention to her fleeing reflection as everyone else did. This time, her hidden awareness alerted her to a change. Something about her turn from the mirror didn’t make sense. Her movements and those of reflection didn’t match. In her peripheral vision she noticed they weren’t synchronized as usual.

There was a difference between her real speed and that of her reflection. Her mirror image didn’t turn as quickly as she did and her eyes stared back at her intently. Suddenly anxious for the familiar breathing on her neck, Heather’s right hand flew up to the nape that held her head. She was trying to protect the sensitive hairs from another invasion.

Heather wanted to walk away but stood glued to her spot. She stared at her disobedient reflection as she fought the instinct to crawl into a fetal position and hide behind one of the toilets. She quivered at the image of herself drooling from insanity and shook away the bad thoughts so she could better concentrate on the mirror. She moved her head to the left and then the right, trying to ensure that she and her reflection maintained the same speed and expression.

Heather had no plan in the event she actually caught another discrepancy in the mirror. She knew the only real conclusion to that kind of scenario would be a loud running scream

through the bar.

Two minutes passed and she was still timing herself when the bathroom door slammed opened.

“Busted!” screamed a female voice.

Angie stood in the bathroom doorway smiling and Heather couldn't have been happier to see one of her closest friends. Jade said she had invited their circle of friends but Heather didn't think they would show up on such short notice. Angie had no idea what she had just walked in on and Heather thought it was typical. Her friend usually tended to show up at her darkest hours.

“Angie!” Heather yelled back happily.

Relief swept through her as she hugged her friend tightly. Heather realized her sister must have told them about her bathroom showdown with the disappearing man because Angie didn't say a word about the obvious cut on her face. Normally, she'd have already had Heather lying down with a cloth full of ice to bring down the swelling.

“Hey girlie, what're you doing in here?” Angie asked. “We've been sitting at the table for like three minutes waiting for you.”

She looked beautiful as usual with long, dark, silky hair and a big white smile. She reminded Heather of a Pantene commercial and Heather knew the guys in the pool room were probably counting the minutes until Angie's return.

“We who?” Heather asked carefully.

Angie counted on her fingers.

“Me, Erin, Jeannie and Frankie,” she said.

Neither woman gave life to the truth that draped itself over them. Benny couldn't be included in their list anymore.

“We felt like singing tonight,” Angie lied.

“Bullshit. What's going on?”

Heather's friends rarely went to places that offered karaoke. It wasn't their style. When they got away from their children and their lives, most of them just wanted to go dancing.

“Nothing, honest,” Angie answered with a hand to her heart.

She pretended to be hurt that Heather would believe she had a hidden motive.

“Come on,” Angie continued. “Let's drink and laugh at people. You can pretend you don't speak English,” she encouraged.

Heather followed Angie back to the table as Joey announced a new singer. He introduced Jade as his special guest and Heather scooted herself into the booth as she watched her sister take the stage. Despite Jade's huge belly, she was quite graceful.

Jade accepted the microphone from Joey and started to sing. Heather still couldn't listen to her sister sing without getting tears in her eyes. Even when Jade was very small her voice had been very big. It could fill an entire room and fill its occupants with a sense of empowerment and pleasure.

Joey flipped on his flashing lights and turned on the smoke machine and created a dramatic setting. Jade sang Angel and Airwaves' hit, *The Adventure*. She knew it was Heather's newest favorite. Angie squeezed in beside her in the booth but they both kept a watchful eye on their eyes on the singer.

"Hey, girl," whispered a female voice.

All of Heather's friends had arrived during her battle with her reflection. They stood halfway and reached over the table to give and take short hugs from one another. Without another word, they turned their attention back to the stage. Heather listened to the words her sister was singing to her. If Jade were speaking through lyrics, she'd be telling Heather she would always be there to pick her up when she fell. When the song ended, Heather clapped the hardest.

The song came to a beautiful end and the customers stood up to cheer and applaud. Standing ovations weren't a typical audience reaction at karaoke shows but they were always a typical reaction to Jade's voice. Heather clapped until her hands were sore and watched her sister walk off the stage, deciding to let herself enjoy the night despite the impending doom.

"What's up, Rocky?" Frankie asked.

"Very funny," Heather answered, fingering her eyebrow to check for fresh blood.

Frankie had become their token boy in a friend group made up of mostly girls. He used to have a balance when Benny was alive but was left as the only remaining member to offset the estrogen. He was the same age as his female companions but looked ten years younger than all of them. Heather hated him for that but not for anything else.

She appreciated her male friends; especially because she got to ask them about guy things. Through Frankie, she heard the male points of view and got to be witness to their behind-the-scenes tricks. His laid back attitude usually classified him as a stoner but Heather knew her relaxed friend was the same, stoned or not. He was just a starving artist whose history in the military had taught him to never take life too seriously.

Frankie had been the guide to Heather's untapped political beliefs and had introduced her to the fantasy movies she'd always ignored. His belief in oneself over a belief in a universal God had pushed her own fragile beliefs to their limits and then teased her to travel farther. She cherished her friendship with him as much as she did those with her girlfriends.

Angie, who had practically saved Heather from her own shadow moments before, sat between her and Frankie. Her petite friend tried to make room for everyone to sit comfortably. She had always been the nurturer of the group and had always been the most generous of all of her friends.

Angie once insisted on loaning Heather several hundreds of dollars during a Christmas

season when her friend felt Heather suffered silently from financial struggle. Angie had been right and she had been the only one to offer her more than good luck. Heather had accepted reluctantly and didn't rest until she paid every penny back, plus some. Not once after lending the money to her did Angie ever question its return.

Angie was sweet and fun and she gave off comfortable vibes to almost everyone who met her. In addition to her striking outer beauty, Angie was beautiful on the inside as well. She never had a harsh word to say behind someone's back and was the first to jump up and protect a friend, emotionally or physically.

Angie passed the pitcher of beer across the table to Erin, who had started out Jade's best friend but ended up being claimed by both sisters. She was the snottiest and the funniest of the group, either turning her nose up at a guy who had forced her to "waste a glance" or laughing along with the others at something that came flying out of her own mouth.

Men loved Erin everywhere she went. Her glasses did nothing to camouflage her pretty face and her meanness toward them seemed to turn them on. She was a challenge to men and women alike and Heather had always found it endearing that Erin claimed to follow in her footsteps. It was an honor that her friend saw her as someone she wanted to emulate. After carefully pouring a beer for herself as well as one for Heather, Erin passed the pitcher to a patiently waiting Jeannie.

Her last friend to arrive scooted into the booth across from Heather. Jeannie was a fellow social worker from an old agency they both worked for and had recently revived their friendship. Heather's habit of pushing people away and Jeannie's habit of not allowing people to freeze her out conflicted and they had lost four precious years together because of their differences.

Heather was glad to have her old friend back in her life. Jeannie had always been good to her and her family. She and her husband doubled dated with Heather and Joey more weekends than not. Jeannie had fallen in love with both of her boys. With no children of her own yet, she lavished her love onto Tommy and Jack.

"Whatcha singing tonight, Heather? Aerosmith?" Erin asked.

They all knew Heather would enjoy thoughts of Steven Tyler, no matter how upsetting her life became. She had fallen in love with Aerosmith's singer when she was only seven years old. Most girls her age were watching *Pete's Dragon* and *Bambi* while Heather pressed the play button on *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band* so many times she had broken it.

Though he played the villain who killed her heroine, Strawberry Fields, Heather's heart ached for Steven each time she watched the silly movie. She'd stare at his red bandana and grungy clothes and wish that she herself were Strawberry Fields. She still tingled for the full-lipped, sexy singer and always hoped in the back of her mind that she would meet him one day. Every time a limousine with tinted windows drove by, she pretended it was him. She'd look at her boys and they would all say it at the same time.

"Look, it's Steven Tyler!" Jeannie giggled.

“We don’t have to call you Strawberry again, do we?” she asked Heather.

“No, not tonight,” Heather answered with a smile.

“Look,” Erin said pointing at the wall clock.

“It’s 11:11. Happy 11:11!”

Wishes of a happy eleven-eleven went around the table and everyone drank to the toast.

“Why do we do this exactly?” Erin asked. “Heather thinks it’s good luck,” Frankie offered.

“No, I don’t. I think it means we’re going in the right direction when we see it,” Heather corrected.

“Why do you think that?” Jeannie asked smiling.

Heather paused. She hated coming off as crazy but there was no way around it.

“It’s a number that’s come up my whole life,” she answered. “It’s been my office number and my extension and my change from receipts and the only time I look at the clock every day,” she explained.

“It’s your license plate number,” Angie laughed.

“Well yeah, now it is because it’s important,” Heather defended.

She looked around at her friends as they tried to subdue their amusement.

“I’m serious!” Heather insisted but still maintained her smile. “Look it up!”

Their amusement turned to laughter.

“Look it up?” they asked almost in unison.

“Why? Do they have a website for your crazy thoughts now?” Jade joked. “Must be a busy site.”

“No, asshole,” Heather came back. “Look up 11:11. They have explanations from the other people who’ve noticed it,” Heather said.

“Oh,” Erin joked, looking around at the group mysteriously. “There are others.”

“Laugh all you want but I’m telling you, it’s true. Every one of you has noticed since I told you about it, how much it comes up. Don’t act like you guys don’t believe it.”

“Okay,” Frankie interjected. “What do they say it’s supposed to mean?”

Heather continued.

“They say it’s a pre-encoded trigger that we were all programmed with before we got here and that it comes up to remind us whether or not we’re going in the right direction,” Heather finished.

“But what do you mean by *before we got here*?” Angie asked seriously. “Before we got here from where? And why?”

“I don’t know,” Heather pouted. “I guess it’s for each one of us to figure out for ourselves.”

Heather took a long sip of beer and asked the waitress for their tab. She decided having Joey pay the tab wasn’t worth the guilt she’d been feeling since she’d asked him. It was time to stop telling herself he still owed her if she really wanted to maintain a healthy relationship with him. She decided to pay for the wings and pitcher of beer before Joey or anyone else had the chance.

Who says that exactly?” Jade asked with skepticism.

“Is it the voices?” Jeannie jumped in.

“Whatever,” Heather retorted. She wasn’t really mad. She didn’t mind when her friends teased her. She gave them the reaction they were looking for but someplace inside, Heather laughed at her own strange beliefs along with them.

“The people who have the websites say it,” she continued. “I only looked it up because of how many times it came up for me and, sure enough it’s all over the internet.”

Heather was glad to see the food come just then. Angie made sure everyone grabbed from the tray of wings before getting any herself. The smell of hot spicy food energized Heather and she stuck a napkin into the top of her shirt like a bib. She smiled at the new singer taking the stage, her smile widening when she saw the song he chose.

Within seconds, a bad remake of *Strawberry Fields* poured out of the speakers and Dolly reappeared with their tab. Heather looked at the amount and smiled as she stood to face the bathroom. Deciding to let her friends mull over the coincidences in her absence, she placed the bill back onto the table and pushed it toward them. The amount on the check had been circled in red and Dolly had drawn a happy face right beneath it. Heather handed the bartender her credit card as she passed the bar.

“Hey, Dolly,” she said. “The check says I owe \$11.11. Just charge it for \$15.”

Chapter 12

D r e a m s

Heather laughed when she opened her front door. Though they hadn't planned to coordinate outfits, she and Jade looked identical in ponytails, black dresses and high heels. As they giggled, they shook their heads in unison and each instinctively hid blushing cheeks behind a finger-spread hand. It felt as though an invisible lifesize mirror separated them and it filled the sisters with an eeriness that neither was ready to deal with just yet. Heather couldn't help but think a passerby would have to be very confident in his mental health to drive by and not smash his car into a tree.

"Ready?" Jade asked, obviously refusing to reference the doppelganger moment. They knew instantly it was going to be an interesting night.

Jade's smile was so big Heather thought she looked shiny. Before Heather had the chance to respond, Jade pushed passed her and sprinted toward the bathroom.

"Hey, you might want to think about lifting the toilet seat this time!" Heather called out, half laughing and half serious. In the past, she would have already jumped up to dampen a cloth or ooze emotional support but all that had changed a few months before. Sympathetic and filled with good intentions, Heather had sat with Jade at the base of the toilet when her sister was about five months and Jade's lunch threatened to revive itself. Chunks of hot dog mistook Heather's lap for the toilet bowl awaiting it and the odor sent a message to her own gag reflexes. Clean-up was even more disgusting than the vomit party and both agreed to just allow Jade some privacy in the future.

Heather walked into the living room and watched the boys play video games with Damon. They gave cheers of victory or groans of defeat every few seconds.

"Okay, we're getting ready to go," she said softly.

Damon started out as her boyfriend, became her husband, turned into an enemy, and ended up being family to Heather. He shot a look of disapproval her way but was careful not to let the boys see. She stuck her tongue out at him and ignored the silent plea in his eyes the best she could. Both he and Joey had asked her not to venture out into public until the weirdness was over and Heather had responded with a lecture about power and control issues and a husband's lack of rights post-divorce. She tried to explain to both of them that she was going because of the weirdness.

When she didn't get a verbal response or even a nod from either child, Heather cupped her mouth with both hands.

"Hello out there?" she called dramatically.

"Sorry, Mom," Jack answered with a giggle.

"Yeah, sorry," Tommy fibbed.

Heather leaned in to kiss them goodbye and she inhaled the scents that emanated from their hair and their necks. They had already showered and changed at Damon's persuasive suggestion and both looked squeaky clean. Jack's damp hair was brushed back neatly and Tommy's hung mostly over one eye, as was his new skater trademark. When she asked if they had remembered to brush their teeth, Jack blew a minty puff of air toward her nostrils.

"Thanks, dude," she said.

"You're welcome," he said still giggling.

"Food's in the fridge, Damon," she instructed as she walked toward the kitchen. She had to pass his chair on the way there and when she walked by his chair, she smacked a finger-kiss onto his forehead. Heather continued her walk but stopped abruptly and turned back.

"Thanks for watching them," she said seriously. "You're a good guy sometimes."

"Yeah, whatever," he mumbled.

Damon had never been good at accepting compliments and his responses made it difficult to dish them out very often.

"Who said food?" Jade asked as she wobbled back down the hallway.

Heather glanced at her watch and wondered if there were any possibility of getting her sister safely past the refrigerator and still make it on time for the dream seminar.

After they parked, the sisters practically jumped out of the car. They took the stairs that led to the building two at a time and jogged down the walkway that led to the main building.

"They better not have locked the doors yet," Jade threatened.

"Or what?" Heather laughed.

"Or else I'll be super-mad," Jade said in a dumb valley-girl voice.

As they ran, Heather worked hard to read the bold type at the top of their tickets. It clearly instructed participants to arrive fifteen minutes early and they were about five minutes late. Heather had too many questions and Jade had too much of an appetite for them to accept being locked out so she hoped that wasn't the case. She hated being forced to break into places.

Luckily for all involved, the doors were still open to stragglers such as themselves. They walked inside and oozed amazement at the dream-like room they found themselves in. A building-sized mural painted on one wall showed a woman floating above her bed. It was unclear whether or not she was supposed to be happy about the levitation because she was faceless under a head of long red curls.

Heather knew, without looking down, that her arm hair stood at attention like an army of obedient soldiers. She sucked in a surprised gulp of air and a cold clamminess spread its way across her palms. The picture looked exactly like the guardian angel that her Wiccan friends said they had seen around her and Heather knew she'd come to the right place.

Stars lit up the ceiling and reflected off the wooden floor, creating a strange and beautiful lighting effect. It made Heather feel as though she were one with the universe. She turned to see Jade's reaction and couldn't help but smile at her sister's inability to close her mouth.

A huge spiral staircase remained the centerpiece for the room and it made Heather think of a stairway to heaven. A plaque beside the bottom stair vied for their attention.

Your dreams are the doorways to the evolution of consciousness frozen in time ~ Ellie Crystal

"Do we go upstairs?" Heather asked nervously.

"Like I'm supposed to know," Jade snapped. Her tone told Heather she was getting hungry again.

"Hello."

A deep voice from behind them made both sisters scream shamelessly. When they dared to turn around and face the source of their fright, they found themselves face-to-face with a very tall, very thin man. The smile on his face said he either meant no harm or that he thought they'd look good hanging on his wall.

"I'm sorry," he laughed. "I didn't mean to scare you. Are you here for the dream seminar?"

He offered a hand and Heather accepted the stranger's touch with decreasing concern. He had a gentleness about him that couldn't be misconstrued as anything else. His head was in its last stages of balding and his blue eyes told all those who came into contact with them to just relax.

"Yes, we are. We were just admiring the room; pretty trippy looking. Should we go upstairs? Where's the food?" Jade asked.

Her incessant babbling told Heather she had passed hungry and had advanced to a state of starvation. Heather worried about what might happen if they didn't find some potatoes soon.

"Yes, everyone's upstairs, along with the food. I was just coming out to lock the door so it looks like you're all ours," he answered. "I'm John, by the way."

"Hi, John," Heather said. "I'm Heather Simmons and this is my sister, Jade Carney."

Jade was the only one of the three sisters who still carried their father's name. Heather had decided to hold onto her married name so it wasn't different than both of her children. Lisa shed herself of the name, and the family for that matter, when she got married.

John walked toward the staircase and motioned for them to follow. Heather noted that she got no bad vibes from him and imagined that if she could see auras, his would be mint green.

"Good, we were worried we were too late," Jade said and Heather knew what was coming next.

"Are you serving dinner before or after the seminar?"

He laughed and motioned for them to follow.

“We’re eating during the seminar. As a matter of fact, they’re laying out the buffet right now.”

He turned toward the staircase and led them to the top.

A crowd had already gathered into clumps throughout the large room at the top of the staircase. Heather lost Jade within the first minute but before she had a chance to really panic, her little sister popped up at her side again. Somehow, she had already commandeered a plate of roast beef, new potatoes and broccoli. A coke was in her other hand and a slice of bread was held snugly between her teeth.

“Classy,” Heather said.

They walked toward the tables and noticed that name tags had been placed in front of every place setting. After finding their names, they slid into chairs and hoped nobody thought less of them for the several faux pas they’d already committed.

“You know, it’s probably not proper etiquette to start eating before anyone else has even gotten into the food line,” Heather said matter-of-factly. She looked around the room to see where John had taken off to but couldn’t spot him.

Curious dreamers sauntered around the room, trying to balance dishes and drinks as they looked for their assigned tables. The sisters’ table had already filled to capacity and Heather wondered what had brought each of the others to such a seminar.

She scanned the room in hopes her eyes would magically connect with someone who understood, someone who would give her answers but no such meeting of the minds occurred. When the lights dimmed, she was grateful for the small dose of privacy and focused her attention on the stage in front of her.

John walked onto the platform but this time he wasn’t alone. A petite brunette followed him to a couple of waiting chairs that had been set up on the stage. Heather noticed they each had microphones pinned to the top of their shirts. She wondered if they’d ever forgotten the mikes were on and had been caught talking about audience members.

The speakers introduced themselves as scientists who each carried a degree in experimental psychology. Heather hadn’t been aware that such a credential existed but decided to take their word for it. They had also spent most of their adult lives studying dreams and they seemed excited to share their knowledge. Heather tried to relax and silently formulated the questions she wanted to ask.

When she had first seen the advertisement for the dream seminar, she hadn’t been sure if the focus would be psychological or supernatural. As it went, the dynamic dream duo found a way to maintain a decent balance of each. John covered the groundwork for proven facts, including the stages of sleep and the body’s need for each one of them.

Sandra discussed beliefs that neither Heather nor Jade had ever even considered. She introduced the possibility of dreams leading to other worlds, serving as a portal that connected people to their parallel selves. Heather listened for the sound of chair legs scuffing the floor

as people jumped from their seats to run for the door, but she heard nothing but silence from the audience. When she looked around to assess the crowd's emotional state, she noticed that all eyes were on her.

"What?" Heather whispered to her suddenly rigid sister.

"What do you mean what?" Jade whispered back. "You just screamed."

Heather wouldn't have believed her sister if not for the fact that she seemed sincerely mortified. Her own heart pounded and Heather wondered if this was the moment of the big breakdown. She had no recollection of making any sort of sound and could only assume her dreaded turning point had just been reached.

"I'm sorry," she said flatly, addressing the crowd as confidently as she could fake. "I thought I was choking," she lied.

It was all she had.

John saved her from deeper humiliation by joking it away and bringing the audience back to a place of wonder and awe. At the beginning of the seminar, he had promised everyone the opportunity to ask questions, and they had waited patiently.

Heather was still reeling from her schizophrenic episode but didn't want to lose out on the opportunity to get some answers. She found herself crossing off planned questions only to discover that new ones sprang from their extinction. A short, pudgy woman ambitiously thrust her hand higher than the rest and ended up getting first dibs.

"What's a lucid dream?" she asked in a squeaky voice that didn't match her hearty appearance. Heather guessed the poor woman had faced many social challenges in her lifetime.

"A lucid dream is one in which you're completely aware that you're dreaming," Sandra answered. She smiled and Heather decided the tiny woman held powerful secrets.

"Are they common?" asked an older man at her own table.

Sandra took the floor again.

"Actually, they're very uncommon. As a matter of fact, there are entire religions where people spend years training themselves to obtain lucid dreams."

Heather was struck by a fast moving memory. As a child, she had experienced both terrifying nightmares and complete awareness while she was sleeping. She couldn't believe that she'd forgotten. Without waiting to be called on, she blurted out her first question.

"If we were able to have a lucid dream, does that mean we could also manipulate what happens in the dream?" she asked bravely.

Her hosts seemed impressed by the question and the other raised hands went down, one by one. It was John who answered this time.

"There are ways to influence your dreams but it's not easy. It's strenuous and it requires a great deal of concentration. It's more common within children than adults," he added. His

smile told Heather that he believed she was capable of a lucid dream or at least that's how she interpreted his look.

Another guest asked why children were more prone to it and John answered him.

"We grow up," he said simply. "Our experiences and our pain cause our ability to fade. Think about it. To become both observer and participant simultaneously, we need to block out negativity and accept the unbelievable, qualities much easier for children to attain."

"Qualities that we lose when we come to realize deception," added Sandra.

"You mean, like, getting older and finding out that Santa Clause isn't real?" asked a woman at the opposite end of the room.

"Bingo. The seed of betrayal is born. We forgive the lie but we don't forget it," he said.

"That's right," Sandra joined. "Then we learn they lied to us about the tooth fairy and the Easter Bunny. We're raised in a world of half truths and unfulfilled fantasies followed by harsh realities. It's no wonder so many people lose faith in God. We're waiting for the inevitable conversation that He was never real to begin with and we feel stupid to have believed in the first place."

"Our belief systems are challenged and we move further and further away from the ability to communicate with ourselves on other levels. We start to believe less in the things we don't understand until we completely cut off the idea that other worlds exist at all," Sandra finished.

"What do you mean by our parallel selves exactly?" Jade asked without being called on. "Is that just an analogy or do you really believe we all exist in another world?"

A low buzz traveled from one corner of the room to another as the people voiced mild skepticism. Their speakers hadn't even answered the question yet and everyone was already poised to disbelieve. Heather thought there may be something to what John had said.

The pair had obviously expected the group's reaction and neither of them seemed offended. She imagined they had heard every debate there was.

"We mean it quite literally," John finally answered. His smile seemed genuine rather a facade born of embarrassment. Heather liked him even more than she did at the beginning.

He continued his explanation. "We live in a world governed by balance. There is no good without bad. There's no light without darkness. There's no happy without sad or else we wouldn't know the meaning of happy to begin with. I know it sounds cryptic but it's also quite logical if you really think about it. Each soul that exists has a soul to balance it out in someplace else."

The room got quiet. Nobody seemed interested in what the next person was thinking anymore and eye contact was kept to a minimum. Everyone allowed the words to sink in, each person responsible to which levels those words penetrated.

Questions erupted from the other tables and Heather took in each question and answer. She listened intently and scribbled notes on the single piece of paper she'd brought with her. When questions about parallel worlds were exhausted, the focus shifted back to dreams. An older man three seats away raised his hand.

"What about repeated dreams?" he asked with a note of frustration in his voice. "I've had the same dream again and again for years."

The poor guy didn't look happy about it and Heather fought the urge to ask him what his dream was about. He followed his question with a long sip of water, as though asking it had drained him of all nutrients. John took the question.

"Many would say that it's you sending yourself a message or a warning," John answered.

The man's only response was a deep frown. He was undoubtedly worried about what he was trying to tell himself.

"You mean my subconscious is trying to send a message to my active conscious?" he asked.

"Maybe," Sandra answered. "Or maybe the other 'you' is sending it. Either way, pay close attention. Dreams can warn you of potential danger if you allow them to and most likely, you'll keep having it until you understand what it means. Many bring messages from some part of your soul's evolution."

Heather cut her gaze over to Jade's plate and noticed that some fat and gristle from the beef had somehow escaped her ravenous appetite. She would have been impressed by her sister's restraint if it hadn't been her third plate.

"So do all of our dreams exist in the parallel world?" asked a younger man on the other side of the room. Heather wondered if he was asking because he really wanted an answer or if he was just amusing himself at the expense of the rest of them.

"No. Our dream time is spent in parallel grids of experience. We can make contact with the other world but we can't become a part of it, not even for a moment. If the two worlds met, each would undo the other." John paused and Heather knew it wasn't a feeble attempt at dramatics. He was figuring out how to word something he wanted to say.

"We would cease to exist," John finally said.

"What a buzz-kill," Jade whispered a decibel too loud and Heather's expression screamed "*Shut up.*"

Sandra took up where John left off but she interjected with a lighter and more upbeat tone of voice.

"Picture a parallel grid as the lobby to the parallel world," she helped.

A voice from a table somewhere in the back called out a question. Heather couldn't pinpoint the location or the owner but its familiarity nagged at her. She felt goosebumps spread down her arm and she willed away the paranoia with all her might.

"Sometimes I see something in my dreams and then it happens in real life. Is that a

premonition?" the guest asked. His southern drawl had her craning her neck to see him.

"It could be related to information you've received from the collective unconscious," Sandra answered.

"You mean, it's not just me talking to myself? It's everyone talking to me?" he continued, just a voice hidden in the crowd. But his confusion sounded phony. Whoever asked the question sounded like he knew more than he was letting on.

John addressed the two-part question alone.

"They're usually reflective of religious experiences and said to occur as a means of changing the course of the future." His answer was unusually pat and Heather wondered what had rattled him.

He paused while he scanned his brain for words again, obviously having no trouble identifying the man with the question. John's glare was steady and unmoving. He had only one target in his sights and he didn't look pleased.

"We're all part of a larger world that we're not meant to understand in the here and now. There are times, however, when something does try to pass through," John continued, annoyed.

"Pass through?" asked the amused voice in the back.

"We've all heard stories throughout our lifetime," John answered.

His voice was firmer than she'd heard it all night. He seemed to be having his own private conversation with the man amidst the room of vying hands.

Sandra also seemed distracted by the man with the questions. She picked up where her co-facilitator left off.

"We've all heard of ghosts and spirits and strange, inexplicable happenings, right?" she asked the crowd. The murmurs that followed were affirmations that most had been witness to bizarre sightings at least once.

Feigning the need to stretch her legs, Heather stood up when she was called on to ask the next question. Her real intention was to scan the room until she found the man with the questions and the inside joke. The problem was that he was no longer asking and was now camouflaged by fifty other strangers she didn't know from Adam.

"What if we wanted to have a lucid dream on purpose, could we do it?" she asked. She tried to pull off nonchalance but really felt the beginnings of a panic attack.

"Yes. There are exercises and techniques that can be done to initiate and to enhance the experience," Sandra answered.

"What are they?" another guest wanted to know.

"You have to let go of everything; every thought, every fear, every worry has to be released. You need to learn to achieve a deeper concentration than you're aware even exists.

Imagery is important so learning things like ‘vivid recollection’ can help,” she said. “It can be a lot of fun to those who work at it. When you learn to manipulate your dream-state, you can travel any way you want. You can fly, you can float; you could even transport yourself if you wanted. And things can unravel as quickly or as slowly as you choose. That way, you receive the information at your own pace.”

Sandra was excited. She seemed to be speaking more from experience than from textbook knowledge.

“Can you feel emotions in a lucid dream?” asked the man with the southern drawl. Heather couldn’t think of another reason to stand so she craned her neck as far as it would go. She wanted to stand up and demand that he show himself immediately, but she resisted and decided to wait and ask Jade to point him out at the end. They could investigate together.

“You can experience the emotions but not from the inside, as you’re accustomed to. You perceive them as the observer only. The goal is to diminish your fear using the knowledge that you’re only in a dream. The result, if achieved, can be very powerful and very wonderful but it’s a long road there.”

“So the road to paradise is a long stretch of nightmare?” asked a woman at their own table.

“Simply put, yes,” Sandra answered. “Once you start to feel scared, you can lose your way. Your courage is what lights the way and once the light fades, you chance losing your way back. Your fear can, literally, be the vessel that takes you to a place you don’t want to go to. If you feel yourself getting scared and you can’t fight it, remember to turn back.”

Heather wondered if Sandra had ever been aboard such a vessel. From the way she had to force her composure, she guessed the answer was yes.

“What if you don’t turn back on time?” asked a nervous old man in the front.

“You don’t wake up and the coroner writes it off as a massive heart attack,” Sandra answered, almost apologetically.

“If dreams are powerful enough to kill you, why don’t we hear about it all the time?” asked the old man again.

“It doesn’t happen all the time,” John replied. “It happens very rarely, in fact. You can’t fall into such a deep sleep that you end up there by accident. It’s not about the depth of your sleep. It’s about your ability to let go, your belief system and your desire. It can hardly be achieved by one who studies for years and practices every night. It’s a higher state of awareness that we can’t just happen upon. It must be worked for.”

The group wanted to know how to practice for a lucid dream. They readied their pens and paper and looked eagerly at their hosts for tips. Heather was one of them.

“Before going to sleep, tell yourself you’re going to have a lucid dream. Then decide on a symbol – something that when you see it in the dream, it works to remind you of what you’re doing. It’s kind of like an alarm you’ve set for yourself. Whenever you see that symbol in

your dream, your mind will gain awareness of the dream and you'll be able to interact."

11:11, thought Heather.

"Has anyone here ever heard of Edgar Cayce?" Sandra asked.

A few hands went up and Heather's was the highest. The work of Edgar Cayce had long been a passion of hers and one she inherited from her father. He had introduced her to the book, *Many Mansions*, at the age of six and Heather's belief in reincarnation had only grown stronger every day since.

"He studied a lot in reincarnation but his powers were in what he could do during a sleep state," John said. "His dreams were seen as prophecies and he used the trances to guide actions in the waking world. He'd have out-ofbody experiences and from them be able to describe the needs and cures of patients he visited. He saved many people. There are several recordings of the lives he helped."

"Did the Bible say anything about dreams?" asked a well-coifed woman near the middle of the room. Heather wasn't surprised. She knew the question would come up eventually.

"Sure," John said. "Solomon, Jacob, Nebuchadnezzar and Joseph were all visited in their dreams by God or by prophets." Heather wondered why her speaker was so well-versed in the Bible and decided the man had many secrets.

"And the Upanishads had two perspectives on dreams," joined Sandra.

"What's the Upanishads?" asked about five guests.

"It's a collection of philosophies and beliefs gathered throughout the centuries," she answered. "Because of the many different authors, the book ended up with two very conflicting perspectives on dreams. The first was that dreams are nothing more than our inner desires. The second is that the parallel grid is the only place where Satan can die. They believed that Satan can penetrate any time and any place in our life except for our dreams. Our dreams are safe and their content belongs only to us. If they become frightening or uncomfortable, we're solely responsible. We can't blame the devil." She smiled.

"What about dream sharing?" asked Jade. Heather was surprised to hear her sister ask the question. She had never heard Jade mention anything about dream sharing.

"That's another practice that takes several years and a lot of practice to achieve. Both dreamers would require not only serious concentration but also some sort of telepathic link to one another," John said.

"In the dream, you would select a spot where the two of you would normally meet," Sandra continued. The look she passed her partner was a knowing one. Heather wondered if her hosts had ever met up in the parallel grid.

"Like the Cheesecake Factory," Jade said, referring to their favorite restaurant.

"Yes, if that's what's comfortable for you," John said. "You would allow yourself to become the reality you perceive in your mind's eye. You would look around at your surroundings

and allow yourself to feel the textures, hear the sounds and draw in the sights of everything around you.”

Everyone remained quiet.

“Your target will show up. You just have to keep your eyes open and your nerves calm.”

“How do they get there?” asked another guest.

“You bring them in yourself,” Sandra answered smiling. “You draw their physical being from your memory of them. The stronger the memory, the quicker you can get them there.”

“So, if I just picture my husband, he’ll be there?” asked an old woman. Heather wondered if the lady had been widowed and if she was trying to make contact with her dead husband.

“That’s where it becomes more difficult,” John piped in. “There’s an adjustment issue when you go from being an observer to being an active participant. Just remember to keep meditating on the other person. Visualize everything you can about them. Try to recreate the vibrations and energies you felt when you were last with that person.”

“If you don’t see the other person right away, don’t give up,” Sandra said. “It’s still a dream so there will be surprises.”

“Surprises?” everyone asked. The thought didn’t conjure up happy thoughts.

“You may not find the person sitting in a booth, for example,” Sandra answered. “Her or she may be in the kitchen, working as the cook.”

“Or maybe waiting on you,” John added.

Heather accepted the creepy thought reluctantly. It reminded her of a world where reality was only a fleeting memory of the past and a place where everyone had forgotten who they really were.

“Is there any way to cheat?” asked a hippie with long hair and a beard. He reminded Heather of Tommy Chong and she thought the question was interesting. They both waited patiently for the response.

“What do you mean?” John asked but sported a knowing smile.

“I mean, say our concentration doesn’t work so well,” the hippie continued. “If our mind refuses to power down and allow us the trip, are there any shortcuts?”

“Some feel that they need hypnosis to travel to such a raw state of subconscious,” John answered hesitantly. “Others try to use drugs to force their systems into hibernation.”

He didn’t sound like a fan of shortcuts and Heather wanted to ask why but remained quiet.

“Our minds come to accept things only when we’re ready,” John continued gently.

“Hypnosis forces us to remember things we’re not ready for and drugs suck away our self-control. The road is a difficult one and we should pave it carefully to ensure its safety. We shouldn’t throw more obstacles in the way.”

Heather heard the message loud and clear. Should she ever safely enjoy lucidity, she would have to do it on her own. She wouldn't be able to rely on psychology by asking Dr. Angel for hypnosis or on medicine by popping a Xanax.

The seminar finally ended and the sisters shook their hosts' hands. Heather snuck peeks toward the table where the southern voice had come from and wondered which one of the men had been so rude. Unable to determine his identity, she pulled Jade into a quiet corner to ask.

"Did you see the guy asking the questions?" Heather asked.

"Which questions?" Jade wanted to know. She was having trouble fitting her arms into jacket sleeves.

"The one with the premonitions who sounded like he was heckling the hosts," Heather answered.

Jade looked as though she was preparing for a punchline. She didn't answer at first and her expression changed to surprise when she realized the question had been a serious one after all.

"Are you insane?" Jade asked calmly.

"Why?" Heather asked. She was no stranger to the question but she couldn't understand why it came up then.

Jade stayed quiet for a long time, obviously trying to choose her words carefully. Heather looked around again, her suspicious glare traveling from one guest to another.

Finally, Jade answered.

"It was you, Heather," she said. Worry outlined both her words and her facial features. "You're the one who asked those questions."

Chapter 13

Somebody Told Me

Jade lived in a district that offered daily opportunities for a tarot card reading and a cup of coffee. Ybor City was congested with shops that appealed to those in search of the supernatural and the sisters were on a mission to find answers. They weren't sure which direction to look in and made the only decision that felt right when they made an appointment with a psychic.

The sisters walked the populated streets, both still distracted by memories of the dream seminar the night before. Knowing Jade had serious concern for her mental health, Heather felt as though she'd lost the only person who ever believed her. Her sudden scream and the projection of her own questions onto a stranger who didn't exist had been too much for either of them.

The atmosphere felt calm but had an undercurrent of excitement. It felt as though a storm were threatening to wash the streets of its patrons and send them running into stores, clothes dripping wet.

They passed a Wiccan shop that boasted a life-size painting on the door. Worshippers lay at the feet of the sun, their hands uplifted in prayer. Patchouli wafted out through the open front door, its scent reminiscent of Heather's short-lived days as a Pagan.

The shop next door advertised Israeli archeological gifts. An oil lamp and a jug dressed up the front window and a sign invited customers to a candlelit and historical shopping experience. She figured the owner couldn't afford an electric bill and had decided to pass it off as an ambience he meant to create.

They continued down the sidewalk and stopped when they stood at the door of a Chinese restaurant. A small Asian man had just unlocked and come out of the front door. He offered them a smile that took up two-thirds of his face.

"Good morning," he gushed happily.

His thick accent dripped from the three short syllables. Heather had always seen Asians as harmless but had decided they were the smartest people on earth. If any other country succeeded in claiming hers, she believed China would be the one.

"I mean good afternoon!" he corrected. "Come in, come in."

He waved his arm in invitation and welcomed the sisters in to experience his version of the Orient. Heather wondered if he was really as cheerful as he came off or if his delight lacked sincerity.

She wasn't in the mood for a public outing but her hunger won over. She followed him in and found herself face to stomach with the Chinese God himself. Heather giggled at her literal run-in with the Buddha. He stood almost as tall as the ceiling and seemed to

beckon customers through sheer intimidation.

“Jesus,” Jade muttered.

“No. Buddha,” countered Heather.

They followed the little man to a table and accepted the chairs he pulled out for them. After handing them menus, he took their drink orders and gave them back their privacy.

“Why are we here?” asked Jade, finally. Heather frowned. She had assumed her sister would have been more grateful for the unannounced detour.

“We’re hungry,” Heather answered flatly.

“No, we’re not,” Jade insisted. “We’re scared.”

Her soft smile and tilt of the head always worked wonders for Heather. She had taken comfort in Jade’s features and had come to rely on her gentle words over the past thirty-three years. The simple smile and almost imperceptible tilt had been powerful enough to help fight Heather’s demons away throughout her worst moments. She could only hope that her presence in Jade’s life had worked to comfort her sister even half as much. Heather’s heart saddened with the perpetually unfulfilled wish that Lisa would accept their love as well.

“What are you so afraid of, Heather?” Jade asked as she pulled her sister’s hand into her own.

“Either way, it’s bad, Jade. Either I’m crazy or I’m the target of a violent immortal stalker. I’m not real excited to find out which one it is.”

Heather dropped her forehead into the clasped hands that waited for it. She still couldn’t believe what was happening. She wondered if the transformation into full blown madness had already begun and if the next step was complete submersion into non-reality. Heather pictured herself walking into the Cheesecake Factory as a customer and then seating the other guests. She feared that multiple personalities would begin to take hold and that she would never again be able to discern who the real Heather was from the ones borne of her insanity.

Jade’s eyes exuded love but nothing her little sister said or did could diminish the bitter fear that had begun to take hold of Heather. The only shred of hope she had was to force pro-activity in the face of her impending sloth.

“Okay. Let’s say you’re crazy,” Jade ventured. “So, what? You’ll find the right drugs and you’ll up your therapy with Dr. Angel. I mean, come on, you’ve made it this far right?”

Though she tried to play it off as nothing, Jade knew the truth. Facing one’s own madness was a challenge not easily overcome. Heather shook her head against thoughts of hallucinations and straight jackets but said nothing.

“Or,” Jade continued, “what if something supernatural really is happening?”

Heather shrugged and raised her eyebrows in response.

"You're not alone, Heather. I'll always be right beside you," Jade added.

"That's the problem," Heather finally said, fear weaving through her voice.

Jade tried to respond but was cut off by the tiny waitress who suddenly appeared at their table. Her English wasn't as polished as her boss and ordering was a bigger challenge than the sisters had anticipated. When she walked away, the waitress was still talking. Her words sounded sweet but were delivered in a language unknown to either sister.

Jade smiled mischievously.

"I think she just told you to fuck off," she told Heather.

"What did we order, anyway?" Heather asked and allowed a small smile to escape the prison her face had become.

"Mutt stew, I think?"

"Mmm, delicious," Heather joked.

Jade leaned in closer and her tone became serious.

"Why do you feel like you're all alone, Heather?" she asked.

"We are all alone, Jade; both in the beginning and in the end."

Anxiety etched her tone but she forced out the thought. If she shared what she were thinking, she wouldn't be alone with her scary thoughts. Heather leaned closer into their secret meeting and continued.

"Think about it, Jade," she continued. "I have you, the boys, and my friends and family. I couldn't imagine living one day here without you guys. It's hard to believe I even had a life at all before the boys arrived. Mom was my vessel here and hopefully, you'll both be holding my hand when I leave this place. I'm surrounded by love and by my people but in the end, I'm leaving alone. I have to face whatever is out there by myself. And so do you." She pictured her boys and her composure started to crumble. "And so do they," Heather added.

Heather stopped talking. The thought of her boys facing eternity alone caused tears to strangle her voice box. She held up a finger to say she wasn't finished yet, that she just needed to gather herself together. Jade stayed quiet and allowed her sister to guide the emotion provoking conversation.

"But the thing is," Heather finally continued, "I feel like I know the answers on some level I can't reach. This all feels familiar, Jade; like I've been here before. So have you. Don't you remember being here?"

The question wasn't a new one. Heather had asked her before. She had also asked her girlfriends and both of her husbands. She had asked her children and her parents what they thought of it. Nobody else seemed to be afflicted with the same overdose of déjà vu and Heather couldn't understand why she was the only one who still felt her past lives.

She had no recollection of a clear life but knew without a doubt that she'd had many. She

remembered her deaths more than her lives. The memories weren't clear and they lacked any identifying information for her to follow up on. The only thing that was clear to Heather was the emotion and the fear attached to her last moments. She remembered how it felt, knowing she was taking her last breath and seeing her last sight.

"I really don't remember, Heather, but that doesn't mean anything. I've experienced some strange things and you know how I believe in the things I can't see," Jade said.

It was true. Jade was a true believer. She kept her mind open to the theories most people closed themselves off to. Heather credited their father with the openmindedness they'd both been gifted with. She forced her mood to lighten, despite bodily functions that begged to react to emotional pain.

"All right, let's eat," Heather said randomly. "We'll go see the damn psychic and then cap off the night with a séance and a glass of blood, okay?"

Jade squeezed her hand and smiled.

"Sounds good," she answered.

They went to the long bars of food and let the delicious smells invade their nostrils. Heather grabbed a plate and said a short pray that they'd actually ordered the buffet during their garbled conversation with the waitress. They filled their plates with Crab Rangoon, rice and veggies. Dead fish eyes stared back at Heather from their icy grave and she turned away quickly.

When they finished, they leaned back against their seats, properly ashamed of their gluttony. Heather asked for the check and glanced at her watch. Their appointment was for eleven o'clock and the tiny clock's big hand had just struck the hour, announcing their tardiness.

"What happens if you're late for a psychic appointment?" Heather asked.

"I don't know. I mean, wouldn't they know we would be late anyway?" Jade asked.

"Good point," Heather retorted.

The waitress dropped off their check and pointed out the two fortune cookies sitting in the little black check tray. Heather pushed the bill toward her sister and cut her eyes to the ceiling as she whistled innocently.

Jade laughed and reached into her bra. Both shared the same secret hiding spot that Damon referred to as their chest of drawers. The private compartment held more than just money. Lip gloss, licenses and pills had all found cozy homes in their cups, safely snuggled up to a warm breast.

Jade pulled out crumpled bills and dropped two twenties onto the tray. Heather noticed she had left about a thirty percent tip and she approved, despite the fact they served themselves at the buffet. They were both generous with wait staff because they understood what it felt like to depend on gratuities for survival.

Jade tore into her fortune cookie. She crunched into the middle of the odd shaped snack, using her teeth to pull out the little slip of paper and read it out loud.

“Blessed Be the Child,” she read.

Jade looked down, rubbed her swollen belly and made a face that said the irony hadn’t escaped her. Humming the tune to the Twilight Zone, she carefully folded her fortune and dropped it into her purse. She looked across the table at her sister and motioned to the other cookie with her eyes.

Heather crossed her arms and turned her head. She didn’t want to open the cookie any more than she wanted to see the psychic but Jade inched it closer and closer.

“You’re so annoying,” Heather said.

“Open the cookie,” Jade commanded.

“No,” Heather answered defiantly. “I don’t want to be rude to the psychic,” she added.

“What?” Jade shrieked. “I can’t wait to hear this.”

“Reading your fortune before seeing a psychic would be like eating a burger on the way to a dinner party. It’s rude.” Heather stated. She could feel her cheeks blush at her own feeble excuse.

“Open the friggin’ cookie, Heather,” Jade insisted.

“No. Fortunes as entertainment are fun. Fortunes dropped on me while I’m looking for answers to the universe, not so good.”

Jade picked up the cookie and slapped it down in front of her sister, ignoring the fact that it smashed into pieces.

“Read it,” Jade ordered.

Heather’s lips curled downward and she frowned. She feigned a hurt expression and adopted a sad voice. “You broke my cookie,” she said.

Jade continued to stare at her and she didn’t move an inch. Heather snatched the cookie from the table and opened it, knowing she wouldn’t be allowed to leave the restaurant until she did.

“The road to Hell is paved with good intentions,” Heather read reluctantly.

Jade bit her bottom lip. “OOPs.”

“I feel better now, thanks.”

Chapter 14

Like a Prayer

They stood facing the plate glass window. It was beautiful with its display of intricate designs etched into every square. The front door pictured a woman lounging on a cloud; her arms outstretched as she welcomed lost spirits. The sisters turned to look at one another slowly.

“Oh my God,” Jade said first.

“I know. Do you feel that?” Heather whispered.

An icy chill and strange heaviness hovered around the spot they were standing. Its origin was unknown and the anonymity of it made their bones feel weak. The smell of roses blew its sweet scent into their faces though there were no flowers in sight.

“Bye!” Heather said firmly, turning back toward the direction from which she came. She only made it one step before Jade pulled her back by her ponytail.

“Stay! God, you are such a pussy!” she said emphatically.

Jade always marveled at how her older sister could be so brave in the face of real danger but such a coward about the things that couldn’t touch her. She would opt for a drunk designated driver with a lead foot over a simple game of Ouija.

They had located the psychic through a diligent yellow page search but both sisters were both more skeptical than hopeful. They didn’t doubt that real psychics did exist but they also didn’t believe a true psychic sold her gifts. Throughout their strange lives, the sisters had happened upon many seers when they weren’t looking and none had ever tried to charge them for delivering messages from the spirits.

“Nobody’s here,” Heather insisted.

“We haven’t even knocked yet!” Jade laughed.

The door opened, causing the hinges to play out a slow creaking tune. It felt like a typical horror movie setting and Heather thought it unfair that fate chose to amuse itself at her expense.

A Spanish woman with a small build and a very big presence appeared in the doorway. Heather noted she was striking; beautiful in an exotic way. When she spoke, her thick accent gave away her Hispanic roots even more than her appearance did.

“Hello,” she said softly, making eye contact with each sister for longer than was normally acceptable.

“Hi,” Jade answered. “We’re here for a reading.”

The woman finally smiled and they felt as though they had passed her first test. She

backed up to give them room to pass but maintained her post at the door. It forced the sisters to head into the shop ahead of her and Heather recoiled at the feeling of leading the strange woman into her own lair. They heard the door close and both of them froze in their positions.

“Go on, down the hall,” directed the psychic.

As they walked slowly down the small hallway, each sister stole frequent backwards glances. Jade needed to reassure herself that the woman hadn't morphed into a vampire or werewolf. Heather wanted to prove to herself that she didn't have the barrel of a gun to her head. She feared people the same way most people feared monsters.

They passed an apothecary that boasted loving care and serious devotion. It smelled of aromatic candles and Heather was overcome by the familiarity of the scents. She was struck with a memory that had been in a coma for thirty years. In it, she was little and she was taking comfort from the scent of a cedar music box in her parent's bedroom. The little ballerina had twirled around repeatedly to the song, *Music Box Dancer*. With no further clues to help her color a clear picture, she shook it out of her head.

They knew they had reached their destination when they saw a round table with three waiting chairs. The psychic waved them toward the seats and they sat down obediently.

The table held nothing but a single white candle and its flame stood up, sturdy and proud.

“You're pregnant,” the psychic told Jade.

“Wow, you're good,” her sister retorted. She clasped her hands around her huge stomach and offered her sister an apologetic look that said they could leave soon.

Heather didn't want to waste time looking in the wrong direction but she had no way of knowing what the wrong direction was. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be a lesson learned until she had already screwed up. She moved to stand but stopped when the psychic asked her a question.

“You two are very close. There is another sister, not as close, right?”

Heather looked over at Jade and they stared blankly at one another. A grandfather clock in the corner seized her attention and she focused on the direction of its hands. It was 11:11 a.m. and she nodded recognition to whomever – or whatever – was watching.

“Yes,” Heather finally answered. The instinct that had instructed her to leave took a backseat to curiosity.

“My name is Soraya,” the psychic finally said.

They sized her up more as they traded introductions. Soraya was about five feet tall and all of ninety pounds. When she spoke, something in her voice made them want to listen.

“Traumatic experience and a significant geographical distance are the reasons for the weak bond, right?” she began.

Heather pictured the angry child that Lisa had been. Their eldest sister had often

misplaced her anger but Heather always managed to find it for her. She knew that Lisa had simply been projecting her responses from whatever abuse she suffered and she didn't hold it against her. She reminded herself that Lisa was also the first to defend and protect her little sister from neighborhood bullies.

Heather had a sudden vision of Katie and King, the niece and nephew Lisa had given them and then taken away with her deep-seated hatred. Heather missed them and her heart felt their loss every day. They didn't know how much she loved them and that only heightened the pain. Heather had been angry with Lisa and had included her family in their last fight. It was a fatal move on Heather's part and had sealed their separate fates forever. She wished the kids had been able to remain the two little tow heads who had once loved her unconditionally. Heather realized her thoughts were distracting her again only when she noticed Soraya and Jade staring at her, expectantly.

"What?" Heather asked.

The psychic repeated the request she had evidently missed.

"Could you please cut the deck?"

"Oh," Heather paused.

"Sure, sorry."

She split the deck into two piles and watched as Soraya dealt them to herself in a circular pattern.

Some, she turned face down and others, she lay faceup, exposing the pictures that would narrate the future. The images were artistic and intriguing but neither Heather nor Jade knew how to translate them.

"Before we do your future, we'll do a quick overview of the past," Soraya explained.

The way she referred to them all as a team conjured up images of Dr. Angel and Heather gradually warmed up to the psychic.

Soraya picked up the first card and smiled at what she saw. Heather thought it was a great sign and scooted her chair in closer to the table. When she turned to gage her sister's expression, Jade gave no more than a quick shrug of the shoulders. She knew it meant that her sister hadn't finalized her first impression yet. Heather turned to Soraya and nodded toward the card.

"What does it say?" she asked hopefully.

"It says you've known a lot of love," the psychic answered gently. Her voice took on a note of respect.

Heather felt like crying but not from sadness. She knew that even though her life had been difficult and that she'd known a lot of pain, Soraya was right. She had known a lot of love throughout her life and for that, she was so grateful she could cry.

Jade noticed her expression and knew that her sister had fallen into an emotional pothole. As

usual, she jumped to the rescue.

“Heather, are you all right?” she frowned.

“Yeah,” she answered softly.

“It’s all good.”

Heather pulled back on the snuffle trying to escape and turned her attention back to the psychic.

“I have known a lot of love,” Heather agreed. She smiled despite the tears shining from her eyes.

Soraya placed a hand over hers and made eye contact on a even deeper level. When she spoke, her voice held a tone of affection and Heather wondered what she’d seen that had softened her so much. She looked at the card and wished she understood what the psychic had come to know already.

“Are you looking for an answer to a specific question?” she asked.

“Kind of,” Heather answered.

She could hardly share with the woman that her reflection had taken on a life of its own or that she suspected she had an immortal stalker. Soraya would think they were just playing with her and would be insulted. Or worse, she would believe Heather needed a different kind of help and become sympathetic.

She lifted her gaze to Jade in search of some assistance. Jade caught the look and took over.

“Let’s just say some strange things have been happening to my sister and that your kind of help is what we need,” she explained.

Soraya flipped over the next card and her smile disappeared. She may as well have told Heather that she was scheduled to die in an hour. A wave of nauseating panic washed through her nervous system and left sick chills in its wake.

“What?” Heather practically screamed.

Jade’s voice echoed the same loud question at the same moment. Soraya raised a finger to her lips to signify the need for silence. The sisters quieted down but were visibly brimming over with their need for an immediate response.

“Relax, ladies,” Soraya said, her voice still low. “Remember, this is your past, Heather, not your future. Anything I see right now, you already know about, okay?”

“Well, God, try not to look so horrified about it,” Heather answered.

“I’m sorry. It wasn’t horror. It was sadness I was feeling. It was your sadness I was feeling,” she finished.

Soraya’s expression said she was also feeling somewhat uncomfortable. It suddenly

seemed as though she were trying hard to maintain eye contact and Heather wondered which horrid memory the poor woman had tripped over.

“What did you see?” she asked against her better judgment.

“I saw a painful separation,” Soraya said.

Heather grunted and laughed. “Well, get used to that card.”

“No,” the psychic continued, “This was a big one.”

When she closed her eyes, Heather noticed that her lids sparkled and wondered if it came from make-up or from magic.

“I see a family divided,” she continued. “There’s a man you love very much and he’s going far away.”

Heather looked at Jade. Her sister was already staring at her and Heather’s eyes bounced off the stare just as quickly. She looked back at Soraya and said nothing. She wanted to see how much the psychic could actually pick up on without any help from her. The vision of her past continued and Heather assumed that Soraya was looking back at the day their father left.

“This man, he was a good man,” she continued. “He loved you very much.”

Heather thought about how close she and her father had always been before his alcoholism and subsequent insanity took him away. He had traveled the world, exploring oil as a career, traveling to places like Indonesia and Thailand and Nigeria. Heather missed her father every day that he was gone.

“He’s angry. You’ve been left with everything and he has nothing,” Soraya went on.

Heather frowned at Jade. She knew they were both wondering whether or not their dad had some pent up resentment for the life he had left behind. His being angry didn’t make sense.

“There’s a storm,” Soraya said, somewhat rattled. “It’s a bad storm and you’re both afraid.”

Heather didn’t understand the fear either. She and her father had both loved the stormy weather. She started to wonder just what Soraya was seeing when the woman stopped on her own.

“Let’s look at the next card, shall we?” she smiled.

Her phony smile didn’t fool either one of them.

Something she had seen in the cards bothered her. Soraya spent the next forty minutes helping Heather relive some of her best and worse childhood memories. They got to replay her relationships and her career choices. They traveled the road that led to her children and got a good chuckle over her lifelong clumsiness. Eventually, the time to read her future came and all three regained the seriousness they began with.

Soraya had come to know such intimate parts of their lives that the sisters realized a bond had formed. Their psychic was a gentle and compassionate woman who had a way of delivering the good and the bad with an empathy most people didn't possess. Heather hoped their new attachment wouldn't hinder the tale of her future.

Soraya turned the first card of her future over and just stared at it. The sisters leaned over to see what she had become fixated on but didn't understand the image anyway. A man holding an hourglass stood in what appeared to be a rainstorm. Lightning was at the top of the card and rolling waves edged the bottom.

"I don't understand," Soraya said softly.

"What is it?" Heather asked nervously.

"It's the man from your past," the psychic answered.

"The angry one who left me?" Heather asked.

"Yes, him," Soraya answered dully.

"So?" Heather asked. "There are a lot of people from my past that I hope to meet again in my future. Why is that so upsetting?"

Soraya looked up shyly. She didn't want to tell them something but obviously felt that she had to.

"The man from your past died. You were so sure it was your father and I didn't want to make you relive his death again."

"Yeah, that's really important," Jade jumped in. "Especially since our father's not dead."

"Yeah, well this man did die. And now, somehow, he's in your future. And he's angry," she finished. Her expression said she wished the girls had never come to her for a reading.

Heather finally dared a glance at her sister. When she caught Jade's expression, she knew her sister had been overcome by the same dark chills.

Chapter 15

Like a Pill

Heather sat on Dr. Angel's couch, holding the pillow and looking expectantly at her psychiatrist. He was the only person who understood her, who knew her as much as she knew herself. The small office was her safe haven and she waited for the words that turned on her invisible safety valve. They were the seven words that gave her permission to explore her soul and until she heard them, she wouldn't begin.

"Where would you like to start today?" he asked.

She smiled. Heather knew it wasn't healthy that she idealized him so much but she couldn't help it. He read her like a book and she desperately needed a good reader to get her through the blind spots. She only wished he allowed for the possibility of the unexplainable at times. She wanted him to travel with her to places where reason didn't exist and only faith would guide the way. She knew he was capable of it because of his religious beliefs but couldn't understand why he didn't allow her to have it as well.

She figured she may as well just get to it. Her main objective was to share with her doctor that she believed her random attacks were all related. She would somehow work up to telling him her attacker had been the same man every time. The risk was high because the confession spoke to her instability on many levels. It said she not only believed in time travel but also that she was the target of a supernatural enemy. It wasn't a confession she could take back or brush off by saying she was just kidding.

She glanced around nervously and looked for cameras or tape recorders. In case he decided to finally call in for back-up, Heather wanted to make sure he couldn't prove her words. Although she trusted Dr. Angel more than she had ever trusted anyone, she never forgot who he was. He was her doctor and was still mandated to follow a certain protocol when dealing with crazy people.

"Okay," she began. "Try to stay with me cause it's gonna sound weird," she said pensively. She was quiet as she waited for the affirmation that he wouldn't abandon her either mentally, physically, or spiritually.

"I'm listening," he said.

"All right, it's like the attacks are becoming more memorable instead of fading away," Heather began. She left out the part about being stalked by a guy who disappears into thin air and is obsessed with the time.

"What's clearer about them now than before?" he asked.

"Well, the attacker for one," she answered. "His face used to be blurry."

"And it's not any more?"

She shook her head slowly and peeked out at him from behind a curtain of hair.

“I don’t want to say it,” she replied quickly.

“What’s stopping you?”

“My need for you to believe I’m sane,” she said.

“Or maybe the need for you to believe you’re sane?” he ventured.

“I don’t know,” Heather said warily. “I’m sure you’ll find a logical explanation for it. You’ll probably say that my memories are convoluted or that I’m unknowingly applying the same face to each attacker.”

She knew what was going through his mind as the words came out of her mouth. He believed she was transferring all of her thoughts and feelings onto him and that it was she who feared finding the logical explanation. He would try to convince her she needed to make it bigger than it really was because she lacked something else and if he were successful, she would have to accept the worst case scenario. She would have to believe that nothing supernatural was happening and that she was just suffering from paranoid delusions.

He sat back in his chair, his combination of frown and grin throwing her off.

“You’ve already decided what my response will be but you haven’t even told me what’s going on,” he shared, amused.

Heather searched for the right words. She was afraid of his response on two entirely different levels. If he disbelieved her, she knew it would mean he didn’t trust her and that he never had. Even worse, his disbelief in her would prove his inability to believe in anything bigger than them. She didn’t want to face the issues that would arise if either came to light.

“You remember the time lapses between the attacks, right?” she asked him.

“Well,,” he leaned forward. “If memory serves me correctly, there was the break in at twelve, the attempted kidnapping at seventeen, and the mugging just a few years ago, right?” he asked.

Heather nodded.

“So,” he began, “they took place over a span of about twenty years,” he concluded.

“That’s right, twenty years,” she repeated.

“Okay,” he responded slowly.

The puzzled expression remained stuck to his face. He wanted her to know that he wasn’t with her so she could find another way to bring him in. Their honesty and communication had always worked to open up lines that otherwise would have stayed closed.

“Well, don’t you think it’s weird that I seem to attract so many bad guys who want to hurt me?” she asked.

Her shoulders pulled into a shrug and her hands went dramatically into the air. The non-verbal gesture spoke more clearly than her words could at the moment. It said that, to her, the many attacks were a phenomenon and she found it hard to believe everyone else ignored and brushed them off.

“Sure, there are some coincidences, Heather,” he began. She noticed that he was choosing his words more carefully and she wondered why.

“I also think that the propensity for sudden violence goes up when one places themselves in certain situations,” he continued.

“So, it’s my fault,” she said flatly.

“Heather, what’s got you so defensive today? What’s going on?” he asked with sincere concern.

“I don’t want to say it,” she said.

The room got quiet and they both waited to see what would come out of her mouth next. She wanted to just spit it out and then deal with the consequences but she was having a hard time working up the courage. When he didn’t respond, she tried again.

“Remember I always told you there was something familiar about the attackers and that I couldn’t put my finger on because they were always blurred?”

“Yes,” he answered softly.

“Well, I remember what they look like and now I understand what freaks me out about it.”

“I’m listening,” he said.

“They were all the same guy.”

His reaction hadn’t been as bad as Heather had planned. Dr. Angel didn’t freak out or call in the nut squad or maniacally pull out a hidden recording device. He simply nodded and asked some questions and scribbled on his pad. By the time Heather left his office, she wondered why the confession had ever been so scary.

Chapter 16

Pretty Piece of Flesh

She saw him sitting on the stairwell out front. He was on the last step with his back to her, but she knew who he was right away. She had never taken for granted that daylight was any safer than nightfall and just felt grateful that the boys weren't with her.

She wondered if he planned to move off the stoop to let her pass or if he were just going to grab her leg as she stepped over him. She knew he heard her coming but he remained very still. Heather didn't have to worry about what would happen when she passed him. She couldn't even move.

She stood frozen in her spot half inside, half outside the exit of Dr. Angel's building and tried to block out the screams inside of her head. Finally, he stood slowly but still made no effort to turn and face her. As he reached his full height, Heather felt her senses start to tingle with an uncomfortable familiarity. A deep heat rushed toward her fingertips and shocked them into numbness when he did turn around. Her stalker just stood there staring at her and her fear threshold broke down completely. Without realizing it, she took two steps backwards and barely controlled the stumble that played with her ankles.

She cut her eyes up to her doctor's window and willed him to look out but he never did. Upon a new wave of icy fear, she realized that all other noise and motion had been muted. The only sound she heard was the fabric of stalker's jacket colliding with the blast of wind that suddenly whipped passed them.

"I don't understand," she asked in a whispered croak.

"I know but you will," he replied.

Humor etched itself into his features and it angered her. She was tired of men getting off on her fear.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want you," he answered without hesitation.

"Why?" she asked, fearing the answer.

"You have something I want.

"Well, you can't have it," she stammered, hoping she sounded less terrified than she felt. She half expected a swift backhand for her disrespect

Her eyes darted around the parking lot. Although she continued to pray that someone would come along soon, Heather had the uneasy feeling that the rest of the world had stopped. He was somehow controlling everything in time and space as he held her courage in the palm of his hand. Heather worried she would lose hope in the shadow of his power.

The memory of his smirking face as he dragged her down the interstate made an unwanted appearance. She pictured him wrapping his hands around her throat and squeezing the life out of her and wondered if he expected her to run or fight.

“It looks like one little girl has finally found her voice,” he mocked.

“What do you want?” Heather screamed.

He half grunted, half barked and she was horrified to discover it was his laugh.

“I want what should have been mine, that’s all,” he said.

Confusion mingled with horror and Heather wanted an answer.

“What are you saying?”

“Your choices are powerful,” he said. “They always were. But this time, it’ll mean nothing.”

She felt as though they were having two different frightening conversations. It made no sense that this man who had terrorized her for so long would think she had any power on him. The realization that the same person had committed all of her attacks had been hard enough to wrap her brain around. Now, she had to accept that she held some sort of power over the madman of her nightmares. She wished she knew what it was right then so she could destroy him with it.

She shoved her hands into her jacket pocket to look for something sharp and hope deflated like a popped balloon when she only felt only a cough drop. If she could go back in time, she would pocket one of the tacks she saw pinned to a clipboard at the bookstore. Or she would lift Jade’s nail clippers with the small scissors attached. What remained of her hope started to dissolve faster than an antacid tablet dropped into cold water. He pointed toward Dr. Angel’s office.

“Do you really think he’s helping you?” he asked.

“Yes, I do,” she said, eyebrows lifted in surprise.

Heather wasn’t sure how much he knew about their sessions and became embarrassed just at the thought of him listening in.

He pulled his beige trench coat tighter and knotted the tie that had been hanging loose during their conversation. The sight of it drew pictures of a noose in her mind. He started to walk away slowly and she began to breathe easier in anticipation of his departure. Though she knew he still had the opportunity to grab her and drag her by the hair to his car, she felt certain it wasn’t her time yet. Still, she continued to eye the offending jacket tie.

“What’s wrong?” he asked smiling.

Visions of his tie being tightly pulled around her neck stole her vocabulary and she couldn’t answer his question. She could only stand frozen and pray that he get back into whatever vehicle brought him there. When he started walking toward her again, the muscles in her feet prepared for take off.

He stopped less than two inches from her face and forced her to crane her neck to look up at him. Fear infected her bloodstream and paralysis threatened to leave her defenseless. She gathered her withering courage and looked up into the face of her own private monster.

His eyes were a piercing blue and he couldn't have stood less than six and a half feet. He smelled like a dead animal and his teeth and complexion told her he cared nothing about his appearance. Oddly, she felt as though he had once been a very handsome man.

"Why do you keep trying to hurt me? You don't even know me!" she wailed.

She wondered if it was too late to deflect his answer from reaching her eardrums.

"I know you," he replied softly.

He turned his attention to her car and nodded toward it.

"Nice plate. I'll see you soon," he said as he walked away.

He headed with ease into a wind that would have knocked anyone else over. Without a backwards glance or even a stumble, he walked over to a white van and got in.

Heather stood, feet glued to the floor, just as she had every other time she'd come face to face with him. He backed out of the parking space and slowed down as he prepared to pass. She thought it an odd sight to see a monster driving a car. It was such a typical human action that it became the most surreal moment of their insane meeting. Their eyes met one last time before he headed for the exit.

Heather realized she was still grasping her prescriptions. She'd been unaware they were clutched so tightly in her hands until she saw her knuckles turning white. She made a quick mental note to fill her Xanax as soon as possible.

Motion and noise restarted as though God had switched off the pause button on His grand show. She walked quickly to her car and glanced at the license plate her monster had referred to – *HOS1111*

Her initials combined with her special numbers, screwed onto her bumper in an effort to protect the car and all its occupants. Heather had convinced herself it would prevent an accident. The plate suddenly seemed to take on a different meaning altogether.

As soon as she unlocked the car door and jumped in, the sky opened up and poured sheets of rain onto her windshield. She turned to make sure all four locks were engaged and glanced nervously out the back window. She contemplated where she would drive, who she would run to. She wondered if anyone had seen a tall man in a trench coat talking to her or if they had just seen a lonely girl having a conversation with herself.

Her first thought had been to drive straight to the police station but she knew they wouldn't take her seriously. Already a popular victim in so many random attacks, they would brush her off as an attention seeker. Finally making a decision, she turned the key and listened to the car hum as it came to life. She slammed her foot onto the clutch and threw the gear into reverse without a second thought to the crunching noises coming from the transmission.

"Please be home," she said out loud, finally letting the tears fall.

Chapter 17

Take On Me

Heather drove to Joey's apartment through the torrential rains and prayed he would be home. The storm and its insistence that she keep all her windows closed made her claustrophobic. She turned her radio on a low volume and lit a cigarette as she pulled into his driveway. His roommates were visible through the front window and she vented her frustration about it by pulling on the emergency brake with brutal force. Heather liked Bam Bam and Eggroll but she didn't want them to hear her crazy rants. It was bad enough she had to tell Joey.

Her ex-husband saw her through the window and waved. She didn't care that people thought it was strange that she made best friends out of the men she divorced. She waved back and held up her pointer to say she'd be inside in a minute.

He wasn't always the greatest husband but Joey was one of the best listeners Heather had ever known. Whether she wanted to review a movie or debate a current issue or dissect her own thoughts, Joey joined her. She cherished their conversations and found it difficult to choose anyone over him when she needed to hear the right words. Though Joey perceived her as histrionic, like the rest of the women in her family, she knew he would be the first one to believe her story.

She also knew her sense of peace was a false one but the pounding rain helped her believe she was cloaked by the storm. She contemplated just taking off and heading for Jade's house but found she couldn't do it. In only two short weeks, Jade would become a mother for the first time and Heather wouldn't risk exposing her sister or her nephew to any more danger. She would have to start hiding things from Jade for the first time in their lives.

She turned off the car and listened carefully to the sounds around her. The rain slammed drops onto the hood and the wind sang out a ghostly cry. A voice in her head kept telling her to calm down and she had to force herself to push aside thoughts of death. She looked up at Joey through the window and thought about the demise of their relationship instead.

Heather had gone from one marriage to another without any space or time in between. The first aisle she had walked down led the way for a hotheaded nineteen year old who still believed in fairy tales. The second saw a twenty-five year old with the same capacity for love but with hope that had been severely battered.

Damon's penchant for maintaining as little employment as possible had forced Heather into welfare lines and just the memory of it watered a seed of depression within her. When she had become the target of his anger and the victim of his disloyalties, she reached lows most people would never know. Only when she realized her young son would have no choice but to grow up the child of an abusive marriage did she run screaming to a divorce attorney.

Heather wrapped her hands around the steering wheel and rested her head on its cold metal center. She thought about the strength it had taken to walk away from her first marriage

and the stupidity it took to jump into her second one so quickly. She had known who Joey was before they married and she married him anyway. When she looked up at him again, she saw he had ventured out onto the porch. Heather was hit with the memory of the first time she had seen him and how they had fallen in love almost instantly.

She had been a waitress at a rock n' roll club and he played bass in one of the bands. Noticing his beer was almost empty after a show one night, Heather had approached him to ask if he wanted another. Joey had a sexy smile and even sexier eyes. They were big and round and deep brown. She had always been a sucker for a Puerto Rican.

They entered into a union that neither one had much faith in. Their passion was ever present but the respect always needed a refill. They had loads of fun together but neither trusted the other. And though they tried to make it work for the sake of the boys, they had found it to be impossible. Their differences were stronger than their marriage and again, Heather ran screaming back to divorce court.

Heather glanced around the perimeter of the driveway one more time. She checked her rearview mirror for unwanted guests and finally, disengaged her locks. She kept a vigilant eye out for white vans and scraggly blond monsters as she walked up the hill to Joey's apartment.

Her walk turned into a muddy run and Joey met her at the bottom step with a towel. He draped it gently over her shoulders and led her into his home. After Heather's reassurances that the boys were fine, he left in search of dry clothes to give her. She only showed up unannounced when there was trouble and Joey was preparing for whatever story she had to tell. He knew her well.

Bam Bam was sitting at the dining room table drinking a beer. Heather hadn't always been his biggest fan but she didn't dislike him either. She just wasn't sure what to make of him yet. He was possessive of her exhusband and at times, she wanted to tell him to fuck off and find his own man. Instead, she reminded herself that Joey needed a close network of friends and that he was lucky to have him.

Bam Bam wasn't fat but he definitely wasn't a thin man. He had an interesting face and had grown facial hair since she last saw him. Heather instinctively looked around for his sidekick, Eggroll.

Eggroll was the Gilligan to Bam Bam's Skipper. They were the dynamic duo and she rarely saw one without the other. The feelings Heather had toward Joey's young Asian friend were warmer than the ones she had for his more dominant counterpart. Eggroll had a gentle voice and a fragility about him that made her want to care for him. He was Joey's driver and gopher but she knew that her ex-husband cherished his friendship more than his errands.

"Hey," Bam Bam said. "What's up?"

Heather knew there was no way to hide the fact that she'd been crying so she didn't bother trying. Joey's young roommates were used to her mood changes and knew not to ask about them anymore.

“Hey,” Bam Bam said. “Did you know that Jimmy Eat World spells out Jew and that all the guys in the group are Jewish?”

“No, Bam. I didn’t know that,” she answered.

“I don’t think they did that on purpose,” offered Eggroll.

Heather walked passed the guys and headed to Joey’s bedroom. He was still on his mission for dry clothes and in his absence, Heather thought more about their past together. She clearly remembered how happy she had been when they brought Jack home from the hospital. They had put his room together beside Tommy’s and it was the happy family she had been waiting for. Their love flourished but their differences in perceptions took a heavier toll than either of them expected. She saw the world as a huge place with endless possibilities while Joey was satisfied living in a box of restraints. In the end, neither one was willing to move into the other’s world.

They separated often, as though they were practicing for the ultimate ending. With each separation, Heather took the opportunity to spend time with Billy who always waited on the sidelines for her relationships to fall apart.

She heard Joey coming back into the room and tried to wipe the guilty expression off her face. A quivering lip and an uncontrollable toe tap took its place.

“What’s going on, Heather?” he asked slowly.

She told him without another prompt. She told him everything that had happened up to that moment and hoped that he would instantly regurgitate a good reason for all of it. She was looking for an answer that she knew he couldn’t give but it didn’t stop her from trying.

“Well, you’ve always had question about your parents and your childhood, right? Could it be related to that? Maybe someone who knew you when you were little?” he offered.

“Maybe,” she said quietly.

He knew she thought it was more. In his experience, Heather could be paranoid at times, but for the most part she was a good assessor. She wasn’t very observant of the big things in front of her but she could pick up an eye roll or a dirty look or an elaborate cover-up a mile away.

“What did the police say?” he asked her.

“They didn’t say anything. I didn’t go to them,” she answered.

He stood up and she knew what was coming next.

“Are you fucking crazy?” he bellowed. “A man is stalking you all through town and you didn’t think to go to the police?”

“Oh, I thought about it, believe me. Then I remembered the last time I tried to tell police the truth. Remember how that worked out for me?”

The words came out with bitterness she couldn’t hide. Though it had been a few years, the

anger was still fresh. She knew Joey was thinking about the night he had her arrested on false charges of domestic violence and drugs when he thought she was going to leave him. She knew he was remembering the look in her eyes the night the police slapped cuffs onto her wrist and threw her in the back of a cruiser.

It had been the last straw in their already-weakened marriage. She hadn't wanted money from him and didn't care to interfere with his visitation with Jack. She'd just wanted the marriage over and that's exactly what she had done.

"I'm sorry," Joey said, again. His tone was several decibels lower than it had been.

"I'm just worried about you. The boys need you, and so do I. And probably so does dumb ass," he finished, referring to Damon.

"I don't know what to do, Joey. I can't talk to Jade because she'll worry. I can't risk leading this guy the homes of anyone I love." She regretted the words as soon as they'd flown out.

"Thanks a lot," he said.

"Sorry, that's not the way I meant it. You know I love you. Why else would I be here?" she asked.

"Why are you here exactly?" he asked.

"Forget it," she wavered. "I'm leaving before we get in an argument."

"We're not arguing, Heather. I just asked why you were here."

" 'Cause I'm scared, Joey," she said before jumping up and walking toward the front door. She opened it just as Joey grabbed her by the back of her shirt.

"What's going on?" he asked calmly.

"I can't. You'll really think I'm crazy this time," she said.

Heather knew she shouldn't have come to him. Although his presence comforted her, she knew her presence worked against him. He was trying to restart his life and every time she showed up, she sabotaged his peace. Heather looked at him deeply and smiled a true smile.

"I need for you to make sure the boys always stay together," she told him.

"Don't say stuff like that," Joey said. "You'll be around to keep them together yourself."

Heather continued to smile and decided not to drag him into the situation. She had stop using him as her shield from the rest of the world and admit to herself that he was no longer her husband. More important, Heather didn't intend to let the bad guy make orphans out of her children.

"I really have to go," she said, her eyes shining with new tears. She gave him a quick hug and kissed him on the lips.

“Be careful,” he said, knowing he wouldn’t be able to convince her to stay.

“I will. I’m fine. I’m going home to the boys now. Angie’s watching them and she needs to get home.”

Joey hugged her and Heather called out good byes to Bam Bam and Eggroll as she passed through the dining room. She ran back down the rainy walkway and jumped into her car as fast as she could.

As she turned the key in the ignition, Heather had the sensation the storm was providing the lighting and theme music for her own personal reality show being watched by the rest of the universe. She waved goodbye to Joey as she drove away upon another loud clap of thunder.

Chapter 18

I Miss You

Heather ran through the front door so fast that she almost hit the wall in front of her. She was soaked from hair to boot and still felt as though she were being followed long after she walked inside her house. She kicked off her wet boots and headed for the living room knowing she would find the boys there. She didn't want to do anything else before she hugged them. She relieved Angie of her bodyguard duties and thanked her again before heading down the hallway.

"Hey guys," she called out.

"Hey, Mom," Tommy said looking up from his computer.

He stopped what he was doing long enough to answer her and then returned his attention to the waiting monitor.

"Mommy!" Jack yelled.

He ran up to her and gave her a hug. Heather wondered how much longer she had before he decided he was too old for all of her affections. She returned his embrace and made kissing sounds that told him she had one ready. Jack offered tightly pursed lips and she responded to them happily.

She made it to her bedroom and closed the door. Her confidence was all an act and she wondered if the boys saw through it. Heather opened the door again when another thought struck.

"Have you guys eaten?" she called out.

"Angie ordered a pizza and had it delivered!" Tommy called back.

Heather closed the door again and silently thanked her friend. She didn't have time for guilt and reminded herself that the boys had eaten and that was the important part. Her focus had always been keeping her sons happy but all of that had changed. Now, she just wanted to keep them safe. Heather started throwing clothes into her borrowed blue suitcase.

She had made the decision that staying at Damon's house was a good idea after all, lest she never sleep again. She would always keep one eye open as she strained to hear sounds that didn't belong. Heather looked down at the folded clothes and remembered another time in her life when she had packed with the same emotion.

Heather had been nine years old and her family was visiting their chalet in Vermont. The trip was their parents' last attempt at reunifying and Heather knew, even at her young age, that it hadn't been successful. She knew that when they got home, her life would change forever so she hadn't wanted to leave.

She just kept playing with her Barbie dolls until her parents insisted she get into the car

with them. As they pulled away from the chalet, Heather continued to wave at it the whole way down the gravelly drive. She still remembered the scent of their departure that day. Cedar from the trees surrounding them combined with the fragrance of jasmine to provide her the olfactory strength she would need. When her mother asked who she was waving to, Heather had advised her that she was waving goodbye to herself.

She heard another blast of thunder and walked to her bedroom window. The turquoise curtains had been drawn shut and Heather opened them only wide enough to peek out. She tried to see past the rain and into her dark backyard but she couldn't make out anything. If she hadn't been squinting in search of a psychopathic killer, she would have enjoyed the sight of the windy trees and the sound of the thunder much more.

Someone knocked on the bedroom door and Heather jumped. She saw the doorknob start to turn and flashed back to the time a man had broken into her house while she was home alone. She inhaled deeply and adopted a defensive stance as the door began to open.

"Mommy?" Jack asked.

Heather jumped at his voice and then felt a stab of guilt when she realized she had almost karate chopped her child.

"What's up, honey?" she asked, trying to feign a stable voice.

"Aren't you gonna cuddle me?" he asked.

Jack looked so cute with his mess of dark curls aimed in every direction.

"Yes, baby. I'll be there in just a sec," she answered.

He smiled and closed the door.

Heather thought about taking her anxiety medication. It would have been completely appropriate under the circumstances but she didn't want to chance passing out and sleeping through an attack.

After she cuddled with Jack, Heather watched music videos with Tommy. Then she told her boys good night and closed their bedroom doors. She glanced at the clock and felt an involuntary shudder when she saw that it was 11:10.

Deciding a relaxing bath was the next best prescription, Heather headed toward the bathroom and sat on the side of her big garden tub. She twisted the handles inside and water sprang to life, filling the tub with vanilla-scented bubbles and lavender-scented oils. Steam filled the bathroom because of the hot temperature and Heather crawled into the tub with her first real smile of the day.

After half an hour, Heather decided she couldn't get much cleaner and pulled the drain clog before standing up. One leg at a time, she stepped out of the tub and into a fluffy towel. She sat on the sink counter and started to pluck her eyebrows when a flash of Billy whipped through her frontal lobe without warning. She remembered a time not long before when Billy stood in the exact spot she was in at that moment and shuddered to think what mirrors would say if they could talk.

When her last stray hair had been banished to the sink drain, Heather picked up her toothbrush and brushed her gums until they bled. She gave herself one final look and turned to leave but stopped when she noticed the same thing she'd seen in the bar bathroom.

Heather looked back into the mirror and screamed at the sight of her own reflection staring back at her. Her image stood with a hand on one hip and watched her intently. Heather back stepped without looking and fell into the tub. She sat frozen, legs hanging over the side, amid half-spilled bottles of liquid. Shampoo and conditioner and bubble bath had fallen in with her and she hadn't bothered trying to save them in her terror.

From her place in the tub, she was still able to see the mirror clearly. Though her wayward reflection had already fled, Heather still couldn't move. She tried to calm down by telling herself she had just fallen asleep and dreamt it all but she refused look away from the mirror and didn't end up leaving bathroom for a very long time, sitting in the tub for almost an hour.

The moment her own reflection deceived her, she met a fear she had never known. Stalkers and kidnappers and perverts were nothing compared to whatever had unfolded in her bathroom mirror and Heather was filled with a surreal brand of terror.

Heather had no plans on getting out of the tub until a rescue party showed up. She stayed as quiet as a mouse in a fetal position, never removing her eyes from the offending mirror for a second. She tried to talk herself out of the panic that had taken control of her nervous system. She wanted to call the police so they could chase away the bad guys and make her safe but the thought of revealing her perpetrator's identity kept her attached to the cold porcelain. She knew she couldn't properly defend her sanity when she still questioned it herself.

Heather put her hand to her chest and tapped gently, as though the gesture might restore normal heartbeat. She thought about what the boys would have to face if they lost their mother and the thought was unacceptable. It spurred images of her own mother and drew Heather reluctantly into childhood reverie.

She'd always wished for the kind of relationship where she could run to her mom for comfort, regardless of the situation but Heather had come to accept that their relationship required boundaries and a large amount of withholding. It wasn't that her mother lacked the nurturing gene because she didn't. She had an endless supply of affection with her daughters and her grandchildren and had never turned them away when a hug was needed.

Their silent rules allowed Heather to always seek her mom out in times of trouble but not necessarily disclose the situation that troubled her. Heather used to feel cheated because she couldn't talk to her mom about everything but had gradually come to understand the reasons behind it.

As her own children grew older, Heather realized their pain didn't belong to only them. Each of their troubles infected her the same as it would if the problem had been her own. When they suffered, Heather's heart broke for them and she subconsciously allowed herself to store their every agony in her own emotive capsule.

Heather knew that Laurie had suffered along with her during the rough moments as well. The difference between them as mothers was that Heather wanted to hear the problem's origin while Laurie wasn't interested in reasons. Instead of forcing a relationship that would never be, Heather had come to accept both her mother's love as well as her need to remain unaware of disturbing details.

The past year had seen a great change in their mother/ daughter relationship. As Heather began to accept the things she could not change, the bond between her and Laurie had begun to flourish again.

Heather snapped herself out her trance and looked over at the mirror. When Bloody Mary made no reappearance, she jumped out of the tub, threw a towel around herself, and ran to her bedroom. She hid beneath her covers as she had when she was young and prayed to God for strength and courage. As she lay in bed with a pillow securely over head, Heather decided which answers she would seek out the following day.

Chapter 19

Again

"What do you know about reincarnation?" Heather asked, addressing a frail guy in his mid-twenties who, until her intrusion, had been busy putting up library books. He seemed scattered and distracted and wouldn't be accused of being a pretty boy anytime soon but the librarian's assistant exuded confidence. He was kind and he had an air of humility that most people lacked. It was Heather who hid behind her hair while they spoke.

He laughed in response to her question and nodded her in the direction of a quiet table. It was his invitation to sit down and talk and she accepted by sitting in the chair. Heather smiled but didn't waste time with introductions or pleasantries.

"So, tell me what you know," she said.

She offered the only smile she had left and tried hard to remember if she had showered that morning. Remembering she hadn't, Heather backed her chair up a little and considered offering an apology.

"Working on a paper?" he asked sitting down.

"Something like that," she answered.

"Well, literally speaking, reincarnation's defined as being made flesh again. It's the idea that our soul survives death by being reborn in another body."

"Yes, I know what it means," she rushed. "Where do scientists and philosophers stand on it?"

"Well," he started slowly. "Voltaire said, *"It is not more surprising to be born twice than it is to be born once."*

"I have to agree with him on that one," Heather said.

He introduced himself as Rodney and adjusted the glasses that fell halfway down his nose.

"Oh, I agree too," he stated matter-of-factly.

"We're not the same self every lifetime, right? I mean, there are changes?" she asked.

"Yes, it's said that we develop a new personality each lifetime but that the spirit remains constant."

"Definitely not something subscribed to by Christians," Heather offered.

"No, not the Christians," he laughed. "They think that by believing we continue to come back to life, we are lying to ourselves for the sake of comfort."

It was Heather's turn to laugh.

"Yeah, sure," she said bitterly. "Christians would never lie to themselves for the sake of

comfort, huh? I mean, spending eternity in heaven is much more believable, right?

“Yeah,” Rodney agreed. “It’s interesting, actually, when you look at the ways different religions view the theory. Reincarnation originated within Indian traditions.”

“Like the Hindus?” Heather asked.

“Yes,” he answered.

“And some Greek philosophers believed the teachings and then others followed. Pagans and New Age religions and of course, Buddhists believe but with some variations. Even some Jews believe in reincarnation.”

“What do they say about it?” Heather asked.

“They believe it’s directly related to karma,” said Rodney.

“One life dictates the next by our actions.”

“When do they believe reincarnation started?”

“Well, if we’re talking about souls and we’re talking about one life leading to the next all the way down the line, I guess it would have started at the very beginning.”

“When is it supposed to end? I mean, how long do we keep being reborn?”

Rodney pulled a notebook from the pile of books he had been gathering. He laid it on the table and pulled a pencil out from behind his ear. Heather thought he was going to draw a picture for her but instead he just started doodling while he explained what he knew.

“The Hindus teach that worldly pleasures can never bring deep, lasting happiness or peace and that the world as we understand it is fleeting and illusory. They say we’re trapped in the world because we’re ignorant of our true nature. Supposedly, after many births, we become dissatisfied with the limited happiness the world can bring and we seek out higher forms of happiness, which we can only get through spiritual experiences. When we realize our ‘true self’ is really the immortal soul and not the body we’re living in, all desire for the pleasures of the world are supposed to vanish because they will never compare to the joy we know we’re capable of. That’s when the rebirth is supposed to stop.”

“Then what?” she asked.

“Theories differ. Some believe we spent eternity absorbed in the peace and happiness because of the truth we finally allowed ourselves.”

“Whoa,” Heather said.

“Others believe more in a heaven where we spend eternity with a Supreme Being.”

“Jesus,” Heather said. “Isn’t there anyone who hasn’t made up an entire story and can just admit to not knowing?”

“No,” Rodney answered quickly. “Human beings aren’t designed to stop there. We’re given the curiosity to want to know more and we have the motivation to go looking for it.”

Heather got an idea and changed tactics a little bit.

"I know this will sound stupid," she started, "but have you ever heard anything about 11:11?"

"What, like the time?" he asked.

"Well, yeah but not just the time. I mean, do the actual numbers have any kind of significance?" She felt the heat rush to her cheeks as she realized he had probably just deemed her insane. But he only smiled.

"I understand 11:11," he said softly.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," he stammered. "Do you notice the number more now than you used to?"

"Yes," she answered.

"What's it supposed to mean?"

"In my experience, it means something different to a lot of people. Some think it's the moment when a wish should be made. Others believe it's a sign or a warning from God. There are some who even believe it's a message from Satan."

Heather felt cold all of a sudden. The last one was a theory she had never considered.

"What do you mean a message from Satan?" she asked.

"You know, numerology and devil worship and all of that crap. There are cults of religion that believe 11:11 is a predictor of the end and a warning to repent. Some Christians even believe there are 11:11 signs in the portrait of The Last Supper."

Rodney rolled his eyes to say he was not one of them.

"What about 11:11 on the clock though?" Heather asked. "I mean, was there something significant that happened at that time or on date?"

"I honestly don't know that one," Rodney answered. He jumped up and walked quickly down one of the thin aisles that shelved thousands of books. When he returned, Rodney was carrying a stack of thick books, all related to the Mayans.

He glossed quickly through a few pages and then shoved his glasses back into their rightful spot on his face. He seemed excited and Heather wondered when he last spoke to a real person.

"Look here," he said eagerly. "The Mayans believed 11:11 to be significantly related to the end of their calendar. The 2012 Mayan year end is timed at 11:11 Universal time. Look at this, it's exactly a hundred years since the Titanic sank too!"

Heather pulled the book toward her and read from the page that had gotten the assistant so excited.

“Is this true?” she asked.

“Was the World War I armistice really signed at 11:11 on November 11, 1918?”

“I guess so,” he laughed as he opened another book.

“This one says that at 11:11 a.m. on 2012, the world will experience a change in our nature of consciousness. They say the sun will be aligned with the center of the Milky Way for the first time in about 26,000 years.”

Noticing Heather’s confusion, Rodney added his own bit of knowledge.

“They’re saying that whatever energy that has streamed to Earth from the center of the Milky Way will be disrupted. And they’re saying it’s gonna happen at 11:11 a.m., on the last day in calendar time.”

Heather waited a moment before a burst of fearful energy caused her to almost scream her next words.

“Then what?” she yelled. The loud question in the quiet confines of the library caused Rodney to jump and the librarian to give her the shush finger.

“I don’t know,” he whispered. “The answer’s probably in the lost books.”

“What lost books?” she asked, trying to calm her voice down a bit.

“During the Battle of Maya a lot of their important writings were destroyed.”

“Why?” Heather yelled again.

“Because that’s what happens in war. Things get destroyed,” he answered.

“How did the Mayans know all this stuff anyway?” Heather asked.

“That’s a whole other set of books. Let’s just say there are a lot of differing theories on that one too. Theories that include alien communications and supernatural influences.”

They talked for awhile long and by the time Heather left, she and Rodney had moved from an awkward handshake to a sincere hug. He held the door open for her and said goodbye as she walked out with an armful of books on Mayan civilizations.

Chapter 20

I've Never Been to Me

“Do you know when you're dreaming?”

Heather asked the question from the same spot she had been confessing from for almost eleven years. As usual, she had the leather pillow pulled up to her chest as she tentatively eyed the box of tissue on its usual stand. She maintained unwavering eye contact with her doctor and had no intention of continuing the conversation until he answered her question. She felt frustration simmering inside of her but she couldn't identify its roots.

“Do you mean me personally, or people in general?” Dr. Angel asked as he shifted from one position to another.

“You, me, everyone,” Heather answered. “I mean, are we supposed to be aware of our dreams while we're having them?”

She didn't realize how much she wanted his response until she'd asked the question. Never one to commit to an answer until Heather gave a valid reason for asking it, her doctor deflected the question back to her.

“What makes you ask? Do you know when you're dreaming?” he finally asked.

“No, but I used to when I was little.”

Heather wondered when and how she had lost the awareness. She couldn't remember if its loss had been a blessing or a burden and she cursed her brain for blocking out so much.

“You remember being aware of your dreams as a child?” Dr. Angel asked.

His intrigue made Heather tread further into the conversation. His willingness to participate gave her the validation was looking for. She couldn't believe it was the first time they had discussed it in all their years together.

“I wasn't just aware. I used the awareness to escape from my nightmares,” Heather said with a note of pride evident in her voice. She found it easier to be impressed with the child she was rather than the adult she'd become.

“How?” Dr. Angel wanted to know.

“When I was scared or trapped in a bad dream, I'd create an escape route out of anything that was elevated,” she explained before pausing briefly. The short silences didn't bother her as much as usual.

“Now I have no idea when or if I'm dreaming,” she continued. “I could be dreaming right now for all I

know.” Spooked by her own statement, she looked at him and waited for a response even though she hadn't asked a question. When he didn't offer one, she decided to go ahead

and ask it.

“I’m not, right?” Heather wondered. “I’m not dreaming, right now, am I?”

“No. You’re very awake and with me in my office right now.”

A nervous giggle raced from her lungs to her tongue and then shot out of her mouth.

“I know. I was just kidding,” she fibbed.

“How did the awareness of your dreams help you to get out of them?” he asked as he scribbled on the bright yellow pad. She tried to ignore the secrets he told his steno but realized she really wanted to be included in the findings and was suddenly annoyed by the intimacy she’d been excluded from.

“What did you write just now?” Heather asked.

His lip tugged as he fought a grin but the doctor’s tone couldn’t hide his amusement.

“Let’s talk about why that’s important to you,” he said.

She wanted to tell him it was normal to wonder what someone was writing about them but didn’t feel like wasting one of her precious minutes on the pointless subject. Instead, she brushed off her annoyances and told herself that as long as Dr. Angel was focusing on her, it didn’t matter how he expressed it.

Heather closed her eyes and fought hard to kick-start her impotent memory. She knew if she could transport herself to one of the memories that scared her, she would be able to explain her thoughts with more clarity.

A frown spread itself into tiny wrinkles between her eyes and its appearance told Dr. Angel that she had hit on a recollection. The downward turn of her bottom lip told him it was closer to a nightmare than a dream. Speaking softly, Heather narrated the frightening memory in which she stood on top of a stranger’s dining room table as a terrified five year old.

“I’d find something high enough to jump from and when I wanted out, I’d jump. Sometimes I’d wake up from the dream still airborne,” she finished.

The casual tone she tried to force was phony and had been born of her need to counteract the real she felt. Heather glanced up at her doctor and waited for his hand to move as it poured out more secret observations but he made no movement.

“Tell me more,” he encouraged.

The blurriness tried to take over and Heather felt drops of confusion gradually seeping in. Her memories were merely clips of scattered, broken thoughts that floated by randomly. When she would reach out to grab one, she’d realize it was impossible to catch and the lack of tangibility would make it harder for her to believe herself.

The scent of pine jammed up her olfactory system and the sound of kitchen appliances coming to life filled her ears. Dim candlelight glowed softly in the background of her memory. Without even realizing it, she had tilted her head in her effort to keep the memories

inside. Heather pulled her knees in toward her stomach as she subconsciously sought the fetal position for comfort. When she spoke, her voice was barely audible.

"I once had a dream that my mom's friend took me," she whispered. "She kidnapped me."

"Is that all you remember?" he asked.

"Mostly," Heather answered. "She made me stay inside her house and I kept crying for my mom but that's all I really remember."

She felt the child fight to take over and an involuntary shrug pulled at her shoulders. She didn't have any more memory to draw from. Although vivid, the memory of a nightmare so long ago remained severely deficient in its content.

"But you remember getting out," Dr. Angel stated more than asked.

"Yes, that I remember clearly," she answered firmly. "I remember planning the jump in my head and then waiting for her to leave the room so I could make my big move."

Heather smiled at the memory. She was proud of the gutsy kid she'd been and she welcomed the rare sensation of pride, or at least the momentary lack of shame. She marveled at how she had such mind control as a child but had somehow managed to have none as an adult.

"What was your plan?" Dr. Angel asked.

Heather knew by his questions that her doctor had traveled the distance with her and hadn't silently dubbed her ridiculous for the weird disclosure.

She shifted in her seat and tried use to his interest as fuel for her waning memory.

"I planned to stand on her coffee table and jump as soon as she left the room. It was something I had done before but still, I was terrified of getting caught," Heather said.

Dr. Angel's hand transcribed his thoughts into words on paper and Heather laughed at the thought that hit. She wondered what her doctor would do if she grabbed his yellow pad off his lap and ran out the door. Instead, she continued vocalizing the memory.

"I remember pretending to be happy when she was near me but as soon as her slipper hit the next room, I climbed up on the coffee table. I knew I didn't have much time. The table was short and didn't offer a lot of distance so I worried it wouldn't work."

"Did it?" he asked.

"Yes. I woke up alive and well and safely in my bed," she answered, allowing herself a small smile.

"What do you think it means?" asked the doctor.

"You think I'm looking for something supernatural again, don't you?"

"Do you think you are?"

"No," she answered defensively. She thought about it a little bit longer and added, "I don't

get it. Why is your burning bush my magical thinking?"

"I'm not sure I understand," he said seriously.

She thought about what her doctor had taught her about magical thinking and how he had often applied the term to her most spiritual beliefs. She remembered that each time she dared to allow herself belief in the things she couldn't see, her doctor had credited her missed developmental stages for it. When she had sworn to him that she felt another presence in the room, he had referred to it as magical thinking instead of believing it could be true. When she pointed out how a guardian angel seemed present after every attack and began perusing thoughts of divine intervention, he saw it as a malfunction. And when, Heaven forbid, she told him she believed Jade and she shared telepathic powers, he saw it as a malady he needed to cure rather than a valid sign of faith.

Heather struggled with her next question because of her love for him. She didn't want him to think she was being disrespectful but she couldn't go on working with him if they didn't clear it up. She knew he welcomed some type of resistance from her but the thought of allowing him to claim an adversarial role bothered her. Uncertain how to word the question, Heather decided to just blurt it out.

"What do Jews believe?" she asked.

He smiled.

"You've brought this up before," he replied. "This is important to you for some reason."

"Yes, it is," she stated. "Please answer my question and tell me what you believe exactly."

He sat back in his chair and Heather could see the wheels spinning. He was adept at sorting quickly through which questions were appropriate enough to answer and he was obviously putting some deep thought into what he should say.

"We believe in God and we pray to Him a lot," he said simply.

It was Heather's turn to smile.

"It feels like you're leaving a little out," she joked.

When he didn't respond, she continued.

"What about the Ten Commandments?" she asked.

"Do you guys believe in that one too?"

"Yes, we believe that as well," he answered carefully.

"Okay," she said, trying to pave the way gently.

"Why?"

"Why do I believe in the Ten Commandments?" he asked, bewildered.

"Yes."

“Because I was taught those were God’s rules,” he said simply.

“Exactly, that’s what you’re taught. You don’t believe it because it’s logical. You don’t believe it because you were born knowing in your heart. You believe it because that’s what they taught you. They told you that the creator of the world disguised himself as a burning bush and delivered the rules that were to forever govern mankind and you just believed them,” she challenged.

“Well, your version might be differ a little different but yes, I do believe in the stories that were passed down to me,” he said, obviously grasping the point behind her question.

He didn’t sound defensive but Heather wondered if he was secretly offended. She considered quitting while she was still ahead but realized she couldn’t.

“I believe in God,” she said quickly. “As a matter of fact, I can’t say that I’ve truly ever doubted His existence. And yes, at first it’s because that’s what they told me that’s I should believe. But later, I came to believe some things all on my own. Some answers just became obvious. I think His existence is pretty clear, actually. Just look at the circulatory system and there’s no way you can say that we were thrown together by accident; that we burst through from a big bang and just happened to come together so perfectly. I mean, the eye was handcrafted, Dr. Angel. Everyday logic tells me that we’re here because of intelligent design but do I demand that other people believe me? No. Do I tell people they must have magical thinking because their beliefs are different than mine? No, I don’t,” Heather finished, defensively.

Her last sentences propelled out with more force than she had intended but not because she was angry with her doctor. She actually gave Judaism more credence than she did the Baptist beliefs she’d been hand fed so she wasn’t defending one religion over another. Heather was bothered by something else.

“Are you upset with the way I handle our work here sometimes?” Dr. Angel asked. His tone promised he wouldn’t be upset with her if that happened to be the case.

“No,” she lied.

“It would be all right if you were, you know,” he promised.

“No, I love the way you handle the therapy. You know me better than I know myself and I don’t think I would have made it this far without you and your boundaries and your ability to assess things the way you do,” she said sincerely.

“You could think that too,” he taught. “You could think all of those things about me. I can be good and I can be grouchy and I can be upset and I can be tired. I’m not perfect and if you wanted to think all of those things, it would be okay.”

He was trying to push her out of the extremes again and to nudge her into the gray area where she belonged. He wanted to teach her that she was allowed to feel more than one thing at once and Heather wanted to bask in the lesson but she found it difficult. All she’d ever known was the black and the white. Accepting that an entire world lived between the two spectrums felt unnatural and made her uneasy.

Thoughts of death plagued her mind. Heather despised the thoughts more than anything else and tried to will away the visions of her own funeral. Even worse than her own death was the constant nagging reminder that she could lose someone she loved at any given moment. A by product of her post traumatic stress disorder was Heather's habit of letting herself ruminate in gruesome thoughts. Although most of the bad thoughts were unlikely, the fact is, they were still possibilities and that was enough for her to know.

Heather noticed when Dr. Angel glanced at the clock. He started to speak but she cut him off.

"Time's up!" she said before he got the chance. Instead of allowing her doctor to end the sessions himself, Heather had started ending them on her own the year before. She assumed it gave her a greater sense of control and decided it was healthy.

She stood up and watched as he wrote out her prescriptions. For the first time since meeting Dr. Angel, Heather wondered if the visit would be her last opportunity to relish the warmth and safety of his office. His logical thinking couldn't help her if he didn't believe her and Heather knew she had a choice to make. She wouldn't waste time questioning her sanity anymore because she knew in her heart that something was really happening. Allowing herself to believe she was insane wasn't going to keep her boys safe and she decided the time had come to believe in something bigger than her. She couldn't even continue to allow for the possibility that everything she believed in was simply magical thinking so Heather decided then and there to say goodbye to her doctor for a little while.

For the first time ever, Heather crossed the boundary of touch with her doctor. She leaned in and hugged his neck before walking out of his office without so much as a backwards glance. Heather needed help from a different source now and she resolved to stop questioning herself anymore. She got into her car, locked her doors and headed to church for the first time in years.

Chapter 21

Seven Nation Army

Pastor Eric smiled and Heather knew she'd ended up in his presence for a reason. She needed to learn more and somehow knew the answers were grounded in religion. She wasn't sure why since she was the least religious person she had ever known but she was interested in anything that would help her to not die anytime soon.

Pastor Eric wore a pair of jeans and a red T-shirt with the church logo on it. His dark wavy hair looked as perfect, as usual. He was always dressed casually and his laid back attitude helped to earn him a huge congregation. His parishioners were loaded and what they lacked in morality, they made up for in money. Most of them truly believed their weekly trips to church absolved them of their sins.

The hypocrisy of the church had been the part Heather hated most as a child. As an adult, she discovered that her distaste lie more in the weakness of their minds than their habit of living one way and preaching another. In their desperate bid to pave a golden road for themselves post death, they had allowed themselves to believe the teachings of others rather than finding the answers within themselves. Heather began the conversation with her pastor by telling him exactly that.

"Heather, we don't have the answers by ourselves. Our answers come only through Him." His voice was soft but firm. She saw the same concern in his eyes that she often saw from her aunts and uncles and cousins. It's the look you give a dead man walking and Heather wanted to scream at him to stop. She didn't like being looked at with sympathy or like a Pagan in trouble.

"I don't want to have a debate with you if that's all right. I mean no disrespect, I promise. I just need some answers that I think you can give me," she said, trying to hide the desperation.

"I'd be happy to help you, Heather. What's got you so riled up today," he asked.

She had thought to visit her old pastor after the memory of her Sunday school class teased her while she sat on Dr. Angel's couch. It was a memory she had always held steadfastly to and she felt the need for an answer. She sensed it was important.

"When I was really little, one of your teachers told our class that if we didn't believe in God, we would burn in Hell forever. I got really scared because my father didn't believe and figured the lady would take it back when I told her that my dad wasn't a believer but she didn't. She told me, sadly, that she was sorry but he wouldn't be meeting me in heaven. I cried and ran out and found my mom. She was furious with the teacher."

"I agree. That was needless and she should have worded things differently. I'm sorry you were made to be scared at an age too young to handle it."

“What? Are you saying that you agree with her words, just not the way she said them?”

“Of course I agree with her words, Heather. It says it in the Bible. All you have to do is accept Jesus into your heart and really mean for”

“And all my sins are gone?” she interrupted loudly. “In God’s eyes, yes.”

“That is so convenient. I mean, to be able to commit all kinds of sins and live any way you want and then just ask for forgiveness and it’s gone, poof.”

Heather knew she was threatening the lines of respect in this room as well and the pastor shook his head in pity over her inability to grasp the concept.

“Heather, what about your own family? You don’t doubt that they live a Christian life, do you?” he asked, obviously trying a different tactic.

Heather thought about them and knew she couldn’t honestly say that they lived anything but decent and productive lives. Their communities were better for having them. Their hearts were warm and their acts were kind. Everything they did came from their love for God.

“No, I don’t. But they’re hypocrites in the worst way.”

“In what way?” he challenged.

“All the attempts they made to bring me in and make me a faithful follower only pushed me away further,” she complained.

“How?” he asked. “Explain it to me.”

Heather eased up a little. Her pastor was listening and even better, he was saving judgment. At least he was on the outside.

“Do you remember when I started going to a Pentecostal church?” she asked.

He cringed.

“Yeah, I know,” she added. “I’ve discovered it’s not your favorite neighboring religion. Anyway, I only started going because I had a crush on a kid there but then, I started getting into it. I started believing the Bible and started reading out of interest, not because of the threat of eternal damnation. I stopped smoking cigarettes and quit hanging out with the bad kids. I even brought my Bible to school so that I could share my peace and my faith with other kids.” She rolled her eyes at herself.

Pastor Eric nodded and Heather was relieved that he was following. His non-verbal affirmation said that he understood her dilemma; that it shouldn’t have mattered which church she’d chosen as much as what she did with her beliefs.

Although many years had passed, Heather could still remember the happiness she had felt after “receiving the gift” from God at a sleep-away youth trip. One evening, by the light of their campfire, she allowed them to place their hands on her while they prayed. Words that lacked meaning flew from her mouth as she spewed something fierce in a language unknown to her. The group leader had told her they were the literal words of God and that

she was very special to have received the gift of speaking in tongues.

Heather woke up in her tent the next morning with a happiness she had never known. There hadn't been a moment since where she felt the same boundless euphoria that she'd been blessed with that morning.

She was excited to tell her mother how far she had chosen to walk down her path of spirituality so she did just that. Rather than sharing her happiness, Laurie became concerned and called in the Baptists. They responded with horror and told her she had spoken the words of the devil rather than those of the Lord. They believed that Heather had become vulnerable to evil and needed to be saved.

Her mother had flown her up north to meet with uncles and they had rushed her to their church once she got off the plane. They treated her as though she were their patient and that she'd been shot with an evil arrow. They took her to church to be healed.

Their minister became the leader of the cavalry on its mission to save Heather from darkness and sin. They were mortified that the Pentecostals had been irresponsible enough to have tainted one of their own. The minister preached to her, offered personal testimony, prayed with her, prayed for her, and sent her away with a new Bible. He wanted her to accept that her evil acts were unintentional and that she could recover from the back-slide by immersing herself in the Bible. He wanted her reassurances that she would not return to the wicked place where beliefs differed so much from their own.

Heather shook her head at the memory. She still found it hard to believe that both sides had read the same Bible because their interpretations couldn't have been more different.

On the flight home from her deprogramming session, Heather decided to never go back to another church again, no matter what the religion. Cigarettes and troubled teens came back into her life as she phased out the happiness from her youth trip. Heather still struggled with the belief that the Baptists were better than her, more deserving of heaven than her. Their lives shined brighter in the eyes of God and she knew that if they were right, she was in big trouble. Try as she might, Heather couldn't make herself believe wholeheartedly in the Bible and to them, that was an unforgivable sin. They didn't give her credit for her unshakable belief in God because she turned away from the teachings of the Bible.

Heather loved her mother's siblings and their children very much but she had always felt like the outcast. Her Aunt Julie was the epitome of what Heather believed everyone should strive to be. Although her views were extreme, her aunt's approach was easy going. She was comfortable to be around and she saw only the best in every person she came across.

Aunt Julie was a kind woman whose good deeds far exceeded those of most people. She smiled and joked around and she acted goofy to make people laugh. She loved seeing people happy and wanted the best for everyone she met. She was filled with love that she attributed to her faith and Heather decided it didn't matter where the goodness came from. If she believed it came directly from God, so be it.

Heather stared at her minister for a moment, trying to discern how he was taking in her story.

“The Bible tells us that speaking in tongues is assigned to very special people,” he finally said.

“And you think that couldn’t be me?”

“No, I’m not saying that at all. There are rules, Heather. It’s not that easy. There’s supposed to be an interpreter there with his own gift of interpretation. Doing something so important in such a lackadaisical manner is what, I’m sure, worried your family. They just want to guide you in the right direction.”

“That’s nice, really, but come on. Do you really think it’s better that I live like a pig but believe in the Bible or to live a good life and believe what I really feel?”

“Why can’t you have both the faith and the decent life?” he asked.

He was a cross between Dr. Angel and Judge Oliva and Heather felt naked. The whole world could see her extremes and it was getting embarrassing. It felt as though she were tiptoeing through the gray world with nothing on her but a spotlight.

“Thanks, Pastor, I appreciate your help,” Heather said. She looked at her watch and realized she was late picking up Jade. She had asked Erin baby-sit and she wanted to hear her sister’s voice.

“Where are you off to so fast, Heather?” he asked.

“I have to go hide Jade from a madman,” she answered as she threw on her coat.

“Excuse me?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she answered as she rushed out the church doors.

Chapter 22

The Kids Aren't Alright

Heather knew she needed answers that could only come from her parents. Her mother would resist more than her father because of her need to uphold an image so she headed to her dad's house. He had tried to tell Heather something for years but she ignored him, chalking up his rants to the confused garbles of a drunk. She ignored his books and listened to his stories more for entertainment value than because she believed his claims. He hadn't been a perfect father but his goal had always been to protect his daughters so she knew he would help her. Her dad would disclose everything if it meant helping his daughters.

Heather dropped Jade off at Erin's with rambling explanations and promises to be back soon. She recited the words she planned to use but found herself deleting one idea after another from a fear he would call 911. Heather kept an eye open for anything out of the ordinary and started getting dizzy from the paranoia overload. Her steady stare into the rearview mirror wavered only long enough to prevent herself from smashing into the trucks who shared the road with her. She pulled up in front of her father's house and saw his car parked in its spot just as she knew it would be.

Heather pulled into his parking lot and threw the gear into park before completely stopping. She looked through the windshield and out the back window like a rabid animal and then jumped out quickly. In her run to his door, she forgot to gage her speed again and rammed into it the oak door quite hard. She steadied herself before another injury claimed her healthy eye.

As she banged on the door, Heather kept her cheek against the door frame. He couldn't open it fast enough for her and she started to feel the fear that now reigned in her nervous system. She rested her weight against the door and when it opened, fell inside. Heather lay on the tile and looked up at her nervous and confused father without a word.

She noticed his eyes filling with more concern each moment. He picked her up by her elbow and guided her gently to the couch. Sensing the danger that had followed his daughter, David quickly closed the door and led her to the couch. He sat her down and put a protective arm around her shoulders. Within seconds, Heather was sobbing uncontrollably. She noticed a half empty beer in front of his spot during their embrace but didn't say anything about it. It wasn't her place; it never had been.

She nuzzled her face into the muscle of his left arm and tried to force herself to stop crying but the tears just kept coming. He held her quietly and didn't ask any questions. She knew he was letting her choose her own words and trying to figure out her own way of telling him what she wanted to tell him.

Heather felt as if she could cry for an eternity but she knew she didn't have the time for that luxury. There would be time for her grief later if she found a way to fix everything. When she finally pulled away from her father, she looked at the wet sleeve she left behind and

stared at him with rising desperation and dwindling hope.

“You need answers,” he said firmly.

“Yes.” Heather sniffled.

“Start with what happened to us when we were little, Dad. Who hurt us? Please tell the truth. You don’t understand what’s happening,” she rushed.

Heather glanced over at his bookshelf and felt the guilt trying to tug at her. Thick manuals on out of body experiences, reincarnation and the Mayans took up several hundred square feet. He had been trying to give her answers all along and she had blocked him out.

She saw his expression falter and could sense his composure starting to crumble. When he spoke, his voice cracked.

“I’ve always told you that you would grow to realize your importance one day,” he started.

“Yes,” she confirmed.

He had done more than that. Her father had complimented her so much and had filled her with such a sense of self-importance that she believed he was solely responsible for her narcissism. He had gone beyond normal bolstering when he convinced her that her significance was greater than the world she lived in. Heather had always wondered in the back of her mind if he were trying to tell her she was witch or an alien or better yet, an angel. In the absence of real information, she couldn’t stop her imagination from supplying its own data because in the end, he never really said much of anything. He only alluded to possibilities.

“I don’t know who hurt you, Heather. If I knew, I would have already killed someone,” he said.

“I know, Dad,” she encouraged.

“We didn’t know until we moved away that our neighborhood was riddled with pedophiles. They didn’t teach us stuff like they do now but as you girls searched for answers throughout the years I started looking for anything that might help you.”

“And? Did you find anything?” she asked softly.

“I had always suspected our neighbor, Curtis Knight. Not of hurting you girls necessarily but of not being the person he showed himself to be. I even mentioned it a couple of times but your mom and the other neighborhood parents loved him. He worked on their cars for free and he babysat for fun. It just didn’t feel right to me,” he added.

Heather remembered Curtis. He had to have been in his mid-twenties and he lived alone. Heather’s parents moved them out of the neighborhood when she was only six years old so she had a specific time period to look at. Curtis lived in the house behind hers. Their backyards touched one another and his back door had been only twenty steps away from hers. She remembered passing her swing set and climbing a short incline to get to his house many times.

Curtis had been nice but she remembered he didn't like when she cried. He would become upset and yell at her so Heather learned not to cry anymore.

He played Aerosmith records for Heather and he facilitated games of Kick the Can. She remembered he used to dress up like a vampire and chase the kids around, all in the name of a game they had made up. She had been too young to play the teenage version of hide and go seek but Curtis included her anyway. Heather remembered the fear and excitement she'd experienced when he caught her and pulled the long black cape over her but had no recollection at all of the man ever harming her or her sisters.

"Was there anyone else?" she asked, fighting tears just as she had while in Curtis' presence.

"There wasn't someone else, in particular but I wasn't comfortable with you girls going to Mom's church," he said, sounding as though he was fighting his own internal demons.

"Why not?" Heather asked.

"I don't know," he said looking sheepish and embarrassed. "There was a presence I didn't like.

"But you don't know what it was about? Or who?" Heather asked with impatience in her voice.

"No, I never could pinpoint my source of discomfort."

Heather was quiet for a minute as a thought unfolded.

"Why have you always thought I was so special, Dad?" she finally asked.

Part of her believed that his explanations of the inexplicable were just drunken rants but another part wanted to believe it were true. She wasn't certain what she hoped to hear him say.

"Believe it or not, sweetie, it was just something that was said in passing but it struck me as an important truth," he said.

"What?" Heather asked.

"Who said what?"

"It was your mom's pastor," he continued. "Pastor, um . . ."

"Pastor Eric?" Heather asked puzzled.

"Yes, that was him! Is he still around?"

She knew there was little chance her father had attended any church in the twenty years since he and her mother had divorced.

"Yeah, I just saw him," she answered slowly. "I don't get it. What did he say that was so important?"

“It wasn’t so much what he said but more how he said it,” he started.

When he noticed Heather’s skeptical expression, he pulled back on his excitement.

“The pastor was in the hospital for your birth. Your mom asked him to come,” he said. “I ran into him as he was coming out of the nursery area I was going in. The man had a look on his face, Heather. I can’t describe it but it was intense. He was happy and very satisfied. I asked him what was going on and he said that all was finally well.”

David smiled slowly and his eyes took on a look of wonder.

“All was well?” Heather asked. It meant nothing. She didn’t understand how the words could have been taken in any significant way. Their family pastor had simply been excited about her birth as he was with every child in his congregation.

“All was finally well,” he corrected, placing the stress on finally. “The way he said it, Heather, and then the way he blessed you later. It was surreal and it just felt so important. The man was happy in a way I didn’t understand. It was as though he’d been waiting for you for a very long time.”

Her father shook his head and tried to escape his embarrassment.

“I know it sounds crazy, honey. but I’m telling you, that man knows something.”

“Nothing sounds crazy to me anymore, Dad. I don’t know what he meant by it. Maybe I’m the next Messiah or maybe he just ate some acid that day. Who knows anymore?”

Heather was exasperated. She fell back into the cushions and felt the disappointment nestle into her bones. She hadn’t learned anything that would help her and was exactly where she had started. She was tired and wished she could sleep away the rest of their conversation but ignored the lethargy because she still had a story of her own to tell. Her father loved her and he was one of the few people who would believe her and give credence to the possibility of something supernatural. Heather realized he would still be her best ally and decided to just let go.

She told him everything that had happened and watched as his expression changed from shock to horror to anger and then back to horror again. She felt guilty watching him go through the same range of emotions in ten minutes that she’d at least had a month to get used to. When she finished, David hugged her and told her she wasn’t going anywhere alone.

“Come with me, Dad.”

Heather jumped up without waiting for a response. She knew he would follow her to the ends of the earth.

They got into the car and Heather watched as her father engaged every lock. She knew he’d remain paranoid enough for the both of them so she let herself relax for a millisecond. Suddenly, they heard footsteps on the roof of the car as the radio came to life and blasted her favorite station out of its speakers.

The Talking Heads sang a tune that warned of a psycho killer though they hadn't yet turned the key in the ignition. Heather didn't waste a moment to wonder. She accepted the message and yelled at her father to put on his seatbelt immediately. At the click of her own, Heather stomped on the gas pedal as hard as she could.

Something slid off of the roof and landed in a heavy thud behind them. Heather cut the wheel sharply to turn around face the direction they had just come from. Her father screamed as he tried to quickly assess what was happening. He hadn't yet been introduced to the impending madness and Heather sympathized him for his demonic virginity. She knew the truth was hard to swallow and she hoped he'd be able to handle it.

"What are you doing?" he screamed over the sound of the revving engine.

Heather pointed a shaky finger at the body lying on the street in front of them. It was obvious by the shape and size that it was a man. His clothes were black and his long jacket must have floated upwards during his fall. It had landed directly over his face and it masked his identity. Heather suddenly thought of Curtis Knight dressed up like a vampire.

"Who's that?" her father asked in a shaky whisper.

Heather ignored him. She didn't want to speak for fear her voice would bring the monster back to life. She knew that it was her stalker laying there in the road and she seriously doubted he had any injuries.

Heather aimed her car at the still figure and they both watched in terror as the man's arm slowly lifted upwards. The jacket that covered his face pulled away slowly, until his features began to expose themselves one by one. Heather's hands shook on the wheel and she tried hard to focus her mind on her son's faces. Her boys had always provided her with strength and their images was all she had at the moment.

The stalker sat up slowly as a smile spread gradually across his face. He stared at them through the windshield.

"What the Hell?" her father mumbled.

The scraggly man went from a sitting position to a tall stand in one fluid jump. His smile stayed glued on his face and there was amusement in his eyes. He motioned for Heather to come toward him. He was taunting her.

Heather got the message. She couldn't hurt him with her car or a gun or even a missile. As much as she wanted to mow him over and watch his blood spatter, she thought better of it. She threw her car into reverse and headed for the only destination that made sense.

"You have to hide!" her father screamed as they peeled away.

"We can't hide, dad. He keeps finding me!"

"Where's your sister?" David demanded.

"She's at Erin's," Heather said flatly. She was driving at an unacceptable speed and she slowed down at the thought of her little sister. She wondered if she had done the right thing

by keeping Jade away.

"I don't know, Dad," Heather cried. "I'm just trying to protect her and the baby."

"Why didn't this wacko ever shoot you from a car or blew up your house?" David asked.

Heather shook her head to drive out the bad thought but it didn't work.

"I don't understand," she said in a low voice.

"I'm talking about your stalker, sweetie. Why didn't he just kill you? It would have been the easiest thing to do if he wanted you out of the way, wouldn't it?" he asked.

Heather's heart seized and her mind tried to force out the thought of being blown up. Jade invaded her thoughts and Heather felt a cold chill. Something was wrong.

She pulled out her cell phone so fast that it dropped to the floor and the battery fell out. She bent over to pick it up and it started ringing.

Heather met her father's eyes in a mutual awareness and stood like a watchdog while he listened to her phone call.

The telephone rang four times when Heather heard the click that told a caller they were successful. "Hello?" Erin asked breathless.

"Is something wrong?" Heather asked slowly. She didn't want to hear the answer but there was no way to escape it.

"Heather!" yelled Erin.

Heather could only understand every few words because of her loud sobs.

"Where is Jade?" she asked, stretching out each syllable.

"She's gone! He just took her!"

Heather skipped all the usual warning signs of pending grief and she cried. The fear washed over her and she felt entombed by a numb depression. She looked at her father and his tears mirrored the rush of liquid spewing from her own eyes.

Erin told her that a man had come to the door identifying himself as a cop. He told them that Heather was in trouble and needed their help so they opened the door. She needn't have described the intruder. Heather knew exactly what he looked like. She envisioned her sister somewhere, alone with him and scared for her unborn baby.

Erin kept interrupting herself to catch her breath and Heather was forced to coax her along

"She went into labor!"

Her friend finally spoke the words that Heather had feared.

"She started breathing heavy and when I tried to help her, he hit me and I fell. I'm so sorry," Erin cried. Her words ran together but Heather understood enough.

“I fell to the floor hard and when I looked up, I saw Jade holding her stomach,” Erin continued. “She had this look of pain on her face, Heather. I’m so sorry.”

She paused again. There was more to the story and their friend was having a difficult time getting it all out.

“He picked her up and he was laughing! I couldn’t stop him. He turned around and there was this look in his eyes.” Heather could almost hear her shiver through the receiver.

“What did he say, Erin?” Heather asked. She was trying to ignore her own chills as they threatened to overtake her skin.

“He said to tell you something,” Erin said, an eerie note taking her voice to another place.

Heather waited for the message but her friend was silent.

“Erin! What did he say?” she practically screamed.

“It doesn’t make sense, Heather!’ Erin yelled back.

“He said to tell you that all is finally well.”

Heather pushed the end button and faced her father. Her features were frozen into place and she couldn’t move.

“It’s Jade, Dad. He took her!’ She screamed the ugly words into the universe. “We have to go to the church! The only person that makes sense in this whole mess is Pastor Eric and I’m not leaving that place until he gives me some answers!”

Heather and her father headed to the church without a word. The only sounds that could be heard were the occasional whimpers that escaped them and the droning hum of the engine. There was nothing to say. Nothing mattered until they had Jade back safely.

By the time they reached the church, the front lot had become a field of mud. The sky lit up behind the church and they covered their heads with their hands as they ran through it. They reached the foyer and Heather pulled at the door that was always open to sinners looking for repentance but the chapel was locked.

“Pastor Eric never locks the chapel, Dad. Ever. I was just here.”

She looked to the right and then to the left. She rattled the doorknob and kicked sacrilegiously at the wooden door.

“Something’s not right, Dad,” Heather added. Her voice had become grave.

“I know,” he whispered.

David pried open a side door and squeezed his body through it. He reached in, grabbed her hand and pulled them both inside. They walked through a small dark room and into the large waiting chapel. As they entered the bright, glowing church a shot rang out and David fell to the floor beside her. Heather looked toward the pulpit where the shot originated from and saw Pastor Eric standing at the altar with a huge smile on his face.

Chapter 23

Sister Christian

“Oh my God,” Heather whispered.

The minister who had consoled her through her worst moments stood before her, the man who just shot her father. It was difficult for Heather to turn the face of a friend into one of an enemy on such short notice. Remembering the warmth they had shared in the past, she wanted to take his hand and ask him to pray with her.

Pastor Eric shook his head back and forth so fast that she couldn't make out his features anymore. He stopped suddenly and when he looked up, no longer wore the face of the gentle pastor who had baptized her as an infant. He was the stalker who had tormented her.

Burning, prickly fire felt as though it were shooting through her veins. The heat worked its way up her neck and spread into a large mass at the back of her brain. When the pastor started shouting his words, Heather's heart began to pound too fast for a human to withstand.

“Surprised?” he asked happily.

His smile was so smug. He looked as though he'd just finished a huge meal and the thought brought forth a new horror. Heather started to run circles around the chapel in search of her sister.

“Isaiah 11:11!” Pastor Eric screamed.

His tone was loud and deep and it trilled out the words in a strange pattern she couldn't understand.

“And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people!”

Heather didn't understand. She continued to run as his words penetrated her eardrums. She rushed in and out of a small closet at the front of the church and screamed when she found nothing. Heather's terror was abundant but it didn't even come close to the thought of losing her sister.

“Where is she, you son of a bitch?” she screamed.

Without stopping to wait for an answer, she raced toward him, past the pews and toward the pulpit. He positioned himself behind the podium as though preparing for a speech. Each time he spoke, Heather watched his features morph from one face into another. Starting at his nose, the change spread gradually to his cheeks and created another person entirely. Two simple feature changes and her pastor was a different man.

An eerie, high-pitched noise came from his mouth as it morphed into the lips of another man. The sound was both a laugh and a terrible sob at the same time. His thinlipped grin

went from one side of his face to the other and the sight made her think of their last jack-o'-lantern. Just like their dissected pumpkin, a jagged smile was painted beneath the pastor's lost, hollow eyes. He looked at her with disgust and it only contorted his features more. Her minister appeared to be a caricature of what was previously human but just as quickly, morphed back into his own familiar face.

Heather didn't want to speak for fear her voice would be an invitation to attack. She had no intention of providing the bastard a welcome mat for her murder. He looked up at the ceiling and spit tobacco into the air. It squirted in an upwards stream before disappearing and the pastor smiled with pride at his own bizarre magic display. He looked pleased enough to hug himself.

Jade's voice called her from a back room and Heather's fear was gone. It disappeared as quickly as the tobacco had and Heather took off running. She followed her sister's voice and forced her legs to move with each step.

Heather ran through the choir section and past the organ. She caught her foot on the guitar that had been propped against a wall and her foot got caught in its strap. Heather put her hands out quickly to prevent a fall. The piano began playing a tune and Heather knew it was her pastor conducting the invisible pianist.

She heard him laughing behind her but didn't allow it to stall her mission. Jade called out again and Heather followed her voice to a small back closet. Her sister was tied to a chair and the sight of her captivity fueled Heather with an energy that could only come from rage. With frayed nerves, she channeled the rage to help her untie the ropes and shot darting glances in every direction.

Jade was crying and Heather knew where the sea of tears came from. Her sister was worried about her baby and she held her stomach protectively.

"Are you in labor?" Heather needed both confirmation and information and wasn't sure what Jade had learned, if anything.

A puddle of water at the foot of the chair answered the question before her sister did. She worried in triplicate. Her father, her sister and her nephew needed her but Heather still had no idea what was happening.

The sisters heard the pastor humming right outside their door. He didn't show himself but he let them know he was close by. Heather noticed a hammer on a nearby shelf and she picked it up. It would be difficult for her to use any weapon but this one was especially significant. It was the same hammer that the Sunday school teachers had used to display their projects and drawings.

Heather stood protectively in front of Jade. She used her right hand to keep the hammer in a firm grasp and her left one worked as a beacon. She used it to motion to Jade when she thought it was safe to move. She whispered to stay close behind her and held the hammer high in the air, ready to pound it into anything or anyone that got in her way.

Heather led the way out and headed back toward the altar. She couldn't leave her father

there for the monster to ravage and she couldn't chance hiding Jade. She knew the pastor would still find her. If Heather wanted to save her family, her only chance was by leading them back into the lion's den.

Pastor Eric was back at the pulpit. He held his Bible high and he screamed like a southern preacher.

"Romans 11:11! Again I ask, "Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious!"

The sisters listened as he called out the eleventh chapter and the eleventh verse of every book in the Bible and then stopped abruptly to stare at Jade. He looked her up and down, starting at her eyes and ending on her swollen belly. He smiled and addressed her politely.

"Despite all of your insanity, all of your hatred and all of your sins, He still loves you," the pastor said sincerely. He began laughing and then spoke again. "He thinks He can save you with this."

Pastor Eric moved toward Jade and her sister took two steps backwards. He filled the space between them with another step and gently placed his hand on her stomach. Jade's face contorted into an expression of disgust and she smacked him away as another wave of pain hit her. She groaned through the contraction and then it was gone.

Heather knew the baby would have to be delivered right there. If they tried to run, the child would be lost for sure.

She looked at her father and her stomach clenched again when she saw him still lying still at the front door. Tears spilled out over her cheeks as an ice pick chipped away at her last nerve. Repressed memories pushed their way into her mind as Heather remembered herself as a little girl wearing ponytails and a terry cloth outfit. Her small hand fit snugly into her father's much larger one as they walked home from the penny candy store.

Heather began to understand. Judge Oliva's voice came back to her and she knew what the woman's flippant comment meant. Heather had never really comprehend the value of loyalty.

She tried to ignore the pastor's heavy presence and turned her attention to Jade. Heather made a birthing bed out of one of the pews and helped Jade lie on it. She held her little sister's hand tightly as another contraction hit. Jade groaned in pain and Pastor Eric started to chuckle.

"Don't worry. It gets much worse than this, ladies," he said, amused.

Heather hated him with every fiber of her soul and saving her nephew suddenly became her most important need. His fragile life was already at stake from the worst adversary there ever was and Heather felt severely underqualified for a battle with Satan, or whoever the Hell her pastor really was.

"Why me?" Heather screamed.

“Numbers 11:11!’ he called out in immediate response. “And Moses said unto the LORD, Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? And wherefore have I not found favor in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all these people upon me?”

He ended the tirade with a dramatic pout and he mocked her question. Pastor Eric tilted his head with feigned sympathy. For a moment, Heather wished she had been crazy after all. She didn’t understand half of what was unraveling before her but knew instinctively that she was destined to save more than just her family. She would have preferred the life of a delusional schizophrenic than the life of the woman who let the world die.

“You want to know why you were chosen?” he finally asked. “You really don’t know yet?”

He asked the question with sincerity and Heather thought about the locked doors inside of her mind. Something behind them begged to come out and her resistance was getting too low to fight it.

“It’s taking you longer this time. You get more absorbed every time,” he said gently.

She wondered why he was hesitant to answer and decided he was having fun. He enjoyed hanging the truth over while all of their lives dangled from the end.

He half walked, half floated to a nearby chair and sat down in one swift movement. Heather’s defenses remained helpless when the minister floated to them and hovered close to their faces. When he stuck out his tongue, it just kept coming out. The fleshy and muscular organ boasted a spiky, reptilian texture. Without warning, the pastor wrapped it around Heather’s neck and positioned its spikes to puncture and attack her jugular vein.

She froze and at the same moment that Jade screamed. His spikes withdrew themselves and became just a tongue again. He used it to lick her neck slowly and the sensation drove a chill down her arms, threatening to turn moderate shakes into a seizure.

Heather heard a noise and looked toward the spot where her father lay dying. He was moving and Heather’s heart filled with love for him as she sent God a silent prayer of thanks. He wasn’t dead. She wasn’t alone.

Her father dragged himself into a position where he could see them better and Heather waved at him with a weak smile. The look in his eyes told her that he understood what she had to do and the acknowledgment made her less lonely and more confident.

Jade was groaning and Heather’s hope took a beating. She couldn’t do anything to take away her sister’s pain. All she could offer her was her comfort and presence.

Heather shoved her hand into her pocket and pulled out a tightly closed fist. Without hesitation, she opened her fingers, sore from untying Jade’s ropes, and stuck the contents in her mouth. As she chewed the tiny blue tablets, the strong medicinal taste shared itself with each and every taste bud. The pastor looked as though he were preparing for a ceremony of some kind as he lit one black candle after another and chanted in a language she’d never heard

Heather recoiled from the bitter taste and worked hard to produce the saliva she needed to

swallow them all. As she prepared to swallow her last Xanax, she looked over at Jade, still groaning on the pew and knew the moment had come. It was the moment she had known was coming and deciphering reality was becoming more difficult.

She remembered John and Sandra's words about entering the parallel grid. They had warned her against cheating but Heather didn't have the time or opportunity for deep meditation. The grid was where the truth lived and she knew she couldn't help her family unless she traveled through the nightmare. Heather did the only thing she could. Her nephew needed a chance. His existence spoke of her sister's significance to the world and she needed to live to teach and to love her son. The stalker had been right. Heather held the power in her hands alone.

"What do you want?" The shriek peeled from her throat without warning.

"I want for you to hate the world, Heather," he answered. "I want for you to hate it so much that you never want to come back. Is that so much to ask?"

He turned his back to her and continued to light the black candles. She heard him murmur something that sounded like "Remember the pain, Heather."

Thoughts of the world as Heather had known it unfolded within her brain. She saw the memories as they passed through the space in her mind and she felt a great empathy for humankind. She felt the pain they faced and she suffered along with them each time she watched the news or was panhandled by a homeless man.

She felt a new awareness creeping in and realized that each human is destined to experience pain and loss. It is the nature of life. There is a balance. There's no love without hate; no joy without pain; no life without death. Each of them pays the price of death despite the kind of life they live. They must face the death of family, of people they loved. Each and every human faces morality and eventually, mortality. All wear new scars as they enter the next moment of their lives.

Heather felt dizzy and wasn't sure what to do with herself. She was waiting for the sleepiness to take over so she could enter the grid and she decided she couldn't get there fast enough. She preferred to face whatever hid behind the doors of her nightmares than spend another minute with Pastor Eric.

Heather sat on the floor beside Jade's pew. She caressed her sister's face and one of her tears fell on her sister's cheek. Heather took her hand into hers and squeezed reassuringly.

"It's gonna be okay, Jade," she whispered, smiling.

Jade responded by squeezing her hand tightly as she fought another oncoming contraction. When it passed, Heather stood up and staggered over to her father. She could feel the effects of the medication in her knees as they wobbled and threatened to drop her.

She kneeled beside her dad and placed a hand on his cheek. He was losing a lot of blood and he appeared so weak. Heather didn't know where he had been shot. She only knew that a solid lump formed inside her throat when she realized she was lying in her

father's blood.

The time had come. Heather knew that she had to stand up and walk away from him forever. She leaned forward and touched her lips to his cheek and closed her eyes as she rose from the floor.

A loud scraping sound made her open them as she jerked her head toward the source of the noise. Pastor Eric had pulled Jade into a chair and she was fighting off each of his efforts to help get her seated. Heather knew he was preparing to kill both her sister and nephew and she prayed desperately for the drugs to work faster. She had swallowed many pills and she knew a coma was ready to take hold. She just needed for it to go faster. Finally, the anxiety medication began to soothe her nerves and to comfort her with its poison and its lies.

She pushed away the tears that threatened to choke her words. She walked back over to Jade and stood over her smiling.

"I've loved you so much, Jade. Please tell my boys that they made even the worst days of my life worth living."

Jade's expression turned to one of understanding and sadness.

"Please don't, Heather," she cried.

"I don't want to share this nightmare with you, Jade. Your purpose is to be here and to give birth to your baby. Mine is to go away now. I don't know why but it's what I'm supposed to do."

She touched Jade's stomach and forced a smile. They shared the last tears they would ever share together. Heather knew she had taken enough medication that she wouldn't be back.

"I'm not leaving forever, you know," she whispered to Jade.

"What do you mean?" Jade cried and Heather felt guilty at the false hope she had just nurtured.

"I mean, I'll be back. I've always told you that. If you look for me, you'll find me."

Heather embraced her sister and felt herself weaken as her body absorbed the drug. She grabbed onto the closest pew to prevent herself from falling but it was too late. She tumbled to the floor and lay helpless and awake with immobile legs chaining her to the danger.

The blood drained from her face when she looked up and realized her pastor had erected a tall wooden cross behind the pulpit. Straps were attached for the hands and feet and a medical tray sat nearby, threatening onlookers with cutting instruments, needles and liquids. A dirty cot with rope, handcuffs and a spiked leather belt draped across it took up another corner.

As Heather said a silent prayer, Pastor Eric stopped chanting and stared at her lying on the floor. She didn't know if he were assessing the situation or if he could hear her prayers.

“You’re looking a little unsteady there. Let me help you,” he mused. He started walking slowly toward her. Heather felt the medication shutting down her nervous system and she could feel each organ dying. She knew that taking the pills would allow her time in the dream world as opposed to a gunshot to the head which would shoot her straight into the world of the dead. She was worried about whether or not she would fall out before her Pastor Eric pulled her sister from the pew and nailed her to the cross. She had new knowledge but she wasn’t sure where it was coming from.

As the pastor got closer, Heather tried to remember all that she had learned about a shared dream. She felt his hand on her wrist as the pastor pulled her gently up from the floor. There was concern in his eyes and seeing it gave Heather the jolt of courage she needed.

“What did you do?” he asked nervously.

It was her turn to smile. She was losing focus but she didn’t lose her smile.

“See you soon,” she whispered.

She closed her eyes with the strongest thoughts of her stalker that she could conjure up as she telepathically invited him into her dream. It was her only way. It was where the truth lived and the truth was all that could save them all. Heather’s eyes closed as she fell into unconsciousness.

When she opened them again, her pastor was gone and she was no longer in the church. She was home in her living room and she had a cigarette dangling from her lips.

Chapter 24

Like A Stone

Heather stood just inside the front door of her house. When she felt the cigarette between her lips, she inhaled deeply and invited the sweet toxins into her lungs. She pulled back a small section of the mini-blinds to allow herself a view of the street. All she knew for certain was that she was waiting for someone.

She had been plunged into the deepest part of a dream and thought she may as well have snorted a fat line because she was more aware of her own thoughts than she had ever been in her life. Being so in tune was a feeling that was alien to her. Awareness was a gift she had once been blessed with and had somehow lost. Heather missed it dearly.

She glanced around the room with trepidation. She was in her own living room but the furniture looked different. Chairs and lamps sat in the wrong places and the walls were decorated differently than in real life. It reminded her of Sandra's statement about things appearing different in the dream and she was afraid to go further into the house.

Candles were lit and had been scattered throughout the house. When Heather looked down, she realized she was dressed in lingerie. Her sheer pink top offered more cleavage than not and a blood red t-back told her that she expected sex and soon. Heather knew there could only be one co-star to such a seductive scene and she wasn't at all surprised. When she had willed the stalker into her dream, Heather pretty much assumed it would be Billy who showed up.

She peeked outside in search of a black truck but the street was quiet and still. Heather walked slowly toward the kitchen as she took a long drag from her cigarette. She realized she was wearing stilettos when she tripped with her first step and almost fell through a glass coffee table. She grabbed onto the edge of her entertainment center just in time and straightened herself out.

Heather walked over to the counters and pressed her hands flat against the cold tile. Memories of Billy shot themselves into her awareness and she didn't fight it. She knew it was time to face him. It was time to face all of the decisions she had made. It was the moment she had been waiting for her entire life. Heather looked up at the wall and stared blankly at the clock. It was 11:11 and by the daylight shining through the blinds, she knew it was still morning.

Heather stared at the dining room table and thought of the things he'd done to her there. She remembered how he had instructed her to remember that night while she was cooking dinner. She turned her attention toward the hallway and tried to rally what courage she had left. She realized she only had enough for two steps when she stopped abruptly at the scraping noises coming from the bedroom. She listened closely to the silence that followed before braving a few more steps down the hallway and ducking into the bathroom.

Heather closed the door and looked around the small room. She stood before the mirror that

carried her deepest secrets and focused on the eyes that stared back. Gradually, her image faded and a little girl appeared. It was still Heather's reflection but it didn't reflect the woman she was. The eyes that stared were those of a nine year old. Both love and terror tied the race for lead emotion.

"Can you hear me?" asked her child self. Her whisper was soft and it had the tinny pitch of a child. Hearing herself speak made Heather want to cry. She wanted to reach in, grab herself and re-teach her everything. She wanted to hug her little self and tell her that everything would be all right.

"I hear you," she whispered to Heather, the girl.

Nervous laughter came warbling out of her throat and she had to keep reminding herself to keep a watchful eye on the balance of her roles as participant and observer.

"Is he here?" she asked the child.

"Yes, but be careful," the little Heather warned. "It's easy to get lost in there."

She wanted to tell herself not to be scared but she couldn't. As an adult, she was terrified. Heather pressed her fingers to the glass and smiled. When her smaller reflection did the same, Heather felt as though she had found the little girl she left at the Vermont chalet. The image faded and Heather still touched the glass, trying to fill herself with the courage and hope she knew as a little girl. She left the bathroom and paused at her bedroom door, repeating the mantra that had pulled her through so many bad times.

"*Eleven-eleven – my call to heaven,*" she said silently as she pushed the door open.

Heather wasn't sure who was there but she feared the heavy thumping of her heart might give her away. The pounding jarred her so hard it threatened her footing. The sound reminded her of the incessant beating in *A Telltale Heart*. The courageous part of her worked to propel her body further in the room while the logical part fought the decision.

The caricature of her and Jade at the Minnesota State Fair peeked out at her from its frame. It sat on her dresser, inspiring humor in all who looked at it. Her little sister's cheekbones had been enhanced to a ridiculous degree and her squinty smile made her face look goofy. The artist had even more fun with the worry lines he drew between Heather's eyes. The extreme pull in her forehead gave her the perpetual look of a spastic lunatic. In real life, the picture sat on her bedroom dresser. In the dream, it was lying on her bed. Heather sat down on the bed and never saw it coming when a fist slammed into her temple.

When she opened her eyes, a blurry and confusing scene had drawn itself out on the canvas of her dream. Her head hurt and her first instinct was to determine the location of her enemy. The mission didn't take her long because he couldn't have been closer. Billy sat above her, straddling her torso and looking down with a grin. She was surprised to realize that the groaning she heard was her own and she assumed it came from the painful throbbing in so many parts of her body. She looked at Billy with deep hatred.

"I can't believe you hit me," she said.

Tears betrayed her as they raced down her cheeks. The blow hurt but not as much as the fact that Billy was the one who delivered it. She couldn't guess, even if her life ended up depending on it, what she did to make anyone despise her so much. Billy shook his head and laughed.

"If you're this upset about a punch, you're gonna be really pissed in a few minutes," he laughed. Heather couldn't think of a scarier thing to hear until she heard the clink of metal. His hand came into view and she saw that it was clutching a knife. Billy drew it slowly through the air as though he were wishing it were her flesh.

Heather felt her eyes widen and imagined she looked like the typical pre-murder victim with her lids wide open, her irises expanded, and her pupils filled with disbelief. Billy hovered above her, grinning and mocking her. Though her instincts screamed for her to fight, the shiny blade told her to keep her mouth shut.

"What's wrong?" he teased.

Billy looked at the weapon in his own hand with forced innocence.

"You not afraid of this, are you?" he taunted.

She hated him so much. She refused to answer his question.

With a tentative expression, Billy morphed first into the face of her stalker, then into the body of Pastor Eric, blue eyes and all. When his eyes darkened and settled into a deep brown, she knew he was returning to Billy. His lashes grew longer and the shape of his face became thinner. His hair shortened into the stylish spiky cut that she knew well. Billy was back.

"Didn't you know, Heather?" Billy asked.

"I mean, deep down, didn't you know?"

"No," she answered as she shook her head back and forth.

"Yes, you did," he smiled.

"You knew it was wrong. You always knew it was wrong."

At first, Heather thought he was talking about their affair but then sensed there was something else, something she didn't understand yet. A vision of the two of them making love floated by on a small cloud. Heather reached out and tried to grab the vision but her hand went right through the white snowy mass.

Another cloud by floated by carrying another vision but it was one Heather didn't remember. She and Billy were sharing an apple under a tree and she knew that had never occurred in her current lifetime. The vision brought forth happy feelings and Heather began to wonder if she and Billy had shared more than one life together.

She looked into his eyes and a raw, cold realization seeped in. She had been intimate with a man who ended up being both her minister and her stalker. It was Billy who had followed her and attacked her throughout her lifetime. It was Billy who had tortured her. It was Billy,

as Pastor Eric, who told her that he wanted for her to hate life and there had to be a reason why. Heather wondered what she could have done to him, whomever he really was, to instill such fury and hatred.

“You’re right, Billy,” she said softly.

“I did know it was wrong and I did it anyway.”

He smiled down at her and his expression of rage turned to one of pity.

“You screw it up every time,” he said shaking his head.

“Screw what up? What do you mean every time?”

“You seduced me. You used your power, your eyes, your body. The sin began in your heart. I just took what you offered.”

Heather was stunned and she didn’t respond. She knew that Billy wasn’t talking about their affair or about anything in this lifetime for that matter. She tried to utilize every bit of recall she was capable of but the memory still eluded her.

“You were even a seductive child. You took the power and you used it against everyone’

“What power?” she screamed again.

He made her feel dirty and ashamed and his words contained no rhyme or reason.

“I have no power,” she insisted.

“You have all the power, bitch,” he growled in a different voice. “It’s time to put an end to this!”

His tone was so deep that it didn’t sound human. She didn’t know what the words meant but she knew the rage behind them was very real.

He reached his hand out to her and spoke as Billy again.

“Come here, baby,” he grinned.

She knew he was the bad guy but Heather still felt the same magnetic draw toward him she always had and she reached out for the hand that summoned her.

“Heather!”

It was her own voice that called out to her and it was loud and clear. She didn’t know if it came from within or from someplace outside of her but the one word warned her of the danger she refused to see.

When he started moving to change position, her heart stopped beating altogether. She felt his hand flatten across her stomach and wondered if he could feel her jerking nerves beneath his fingers.

“What are you gonna do?” she asked, breathless and crying.

“What do you think I’m gonna do?” he smirked.

He moved his hand down further down her abdomen and his fingers shot heat through her abdomen.

“Please stop,” Heather cried softly.

The separation of body and soul was familiar to Heather. She was no stranger to taking off mentally when her body was in trouble.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Billy said firmly and slapped her in the face.

Heather’s eyes glazed over as she was pulled violently back into her body. Billy had no intention of letting her miss a moment of their time together

His fingers on one hand crawled further down her skin and the fingers of the other outlined her pelvic bone with his blade. She reminded herself of the lessons that John and Sandra had taught her at the dream seminar and thought desperately of ways to get away from him.

Heather reached down and curled her fingers into his hair. She pulled him up toward her face and distracted him with her eyes as she assessed her wiggle room beneath him. She stared into his eyes deeply and tried to talk to him on a different level. Heather had always been able to talk to people through her eyes when she was unable to find the right words and Billy seemed to respond, just as he always had.

The emotional dam suddenly broke and Heather started to laugh. She felt delirious and no longer felt the restraints that had always kept her in control.

Billy’s expression took on a look of surprise and Heather used the moment of vulnerability to act. She threw all of her weight to the left and let herself fall off the bed and onto the wooden floor. Before he had a chance to step on her, she rolled herself toward the closet doors. Billy started to laugh and it reignited her hatred.

“Do you think that I can’t hurt you here in your dreams?” he asked.

Billy untied his red bandana and rushed her without warning as he pulled the tattered cloth around her neck. He lifted her from the floor using the pressure on her neck to lift her and she heard gagging noises escape her throat. Billy loosened his grip and let her fall to the floor. He played with the homemade noose before her wide-eyed stare. Heather tried to keep her internal light shining but it was fading quickly.

He bent over and wrapped the bandana around her neck again, tugging at it and forcing her into the closet. Heather envisioned Narnia and imagined them falling together in a world neither of them was prepared for. Instead, they slammed into clothing and hangers and all of the boxes from the top shelf tumbled down on them.

Tears stung Heather’s eyes and the increasing pain in her back made everything blurry. She lost the advantage of sight and she could taste blood inside of her mouth. Billy grabbed a long chunk of her hair and dragged her back out of the closet with ease.

“Free will was hard on all of us, you know.”

Heather didn't know where his statement came from or where he was going with it. All she knew was that she needed to get away from him or else her death would be in vain.

"We need respite from all of the forces," he continued. "We need a place of peace."

Heather wanted to pray but felt pretty certain her pleas wouldn't reach God from the place of nothingness she was stuck in.

Billy hated the world for some reason. It was all she could make of his statements so she looked for a response to buy herself time.

"It's not all bad!" she screamed. "We destroy ourselves with our own sins. It's nobody else's fault!"

He laughed hysterically and kicked her in the ribs. Heather lost her breath and almost lost consciousness. She cursed John and Sandra for convincing her there was safety in her dreams.

He poked his finger roughly into his own temple.

"It didn't work, Heather! He tried. He experimented. He failed. And now, we have to suffer for His mistakes over and over again and I just want it to stop!"

"You want the world to end? Is that what you're saying?" Heather was speechless and had no other response.

"Man can't even follow the seven basic rules," he mumbled.

"Seven rules?" she asked.

Heather instantly thought of the Ten Commandments when he spoke of the rules for humanity. He lost her when he said seven.

"The seven basic sins," he answered and raised his hands in question.

She rolled back toward the closet and used the doorknob to pull herself into a sitting position. Heather knew there was nowhere to go and she didn't want to waste her energy trying. A thought occurred to her and she laughed again.

"The seven deadly sins?" she asked.

Billy smiled.

Despite the pain searing into her lungs from the boot to rib contact, Heather laughed.

"The seven sins?" she asked again. She'd always thought they were man-made and now she was to believe they were direct orders from God. Her laughter continued and although it hurt, it still felt good.

"Do you even know what they are?" Billy challenged.

"Of course." Heather stopped laughing and a weak smile was left on her face

Her fear hadn't diminished but at least it had company in the sense of humor that seized her.

“Sex,” she answered without hesitation.

It was the first thing that came to her mind as she envisioned herself in bed with the monster in front of her. He laughed with her and the shared humor felt strange.

“Lust,” he said.

Billy plucked off his first finger as the countdown of sins began. Heather closed her eyes and tried to remember them the best she could. She remembered the Brad Pitt movie where a fat guy lay dead in a plate of spaghetti and became excited.

“Gluttony,” she said quickly.

Billy held two fingers in the air. It felt as though a game had begun where the host was a madman and the contestant his victim. Heather thought about money and its impact on humanity and she shook with excitement as the answer unveiled itself.

“Greed!” she yelled.

Three fingers thrust themselves into the air but Billy didn’t say a word.

Heather tried to think but nothing else came to her. She tried to remember nursery rhymes to water the seeds of her memory and she pictured two little girls; one with a happy smile and the other, a sad pout.

“Envy!” she screamed.

A fourth finger was added to Billy’s hand but he remained quiet.

The memory of a bad choice passed through her.

“Pride!” she yelled.

“Very good,” he said, sounding sincerely impressed.

His hand filled up and she smiled proudly.

“Anger, wrath,” she said and she could hear the significant behind her own words. It was a sin that had taken Heather to places she never asked to go.

Billy held up six fingers and looked at Heather with a puzzled expression.

“That it?” he asked.

The last sin was difficult and hard as she tried, she couldn’t remember what it was. Usually, when she forgot, Dr. Angel was there to help guide her through her own clouded memories. Heather thought about what he would say to her if he were in Hell with her. He would point out themes and he would try to help her push through the blurriness. They would discuss the doors she kept barricaded to keep herself out. She had put every pain, every mistake and every sin behind those doors. She had guarded them with fierce protection so they would never crack open. Instead of dealing with what was behind the doors, Heather had adapted an attitude of apathy.

“Sloth,” Heather finally said.

She leaned back against the door as Billy held up seven fingers and smiled.

“I guess you’re ready,” he said.

Heather was about to ask what he meant when a hallway appeared with a red carpet covering the long floor. Heather thought of the Oscars and wondered what was happening. Slowly, awareness sunk in and she realized she was looking at the hallway of her own mind.

The carpet was a deep red and the hallway had green doors on each side. All of the doors were protected with heavy locks. There were four on one side and three on the other, making seven doors in all.

Heather knew what waited behind the doors and she got scared. It was time for her to face the truths and fears she had hid from herself for so long. She gave an involuntary shudder and turned back to look at Billy but he was gone. Heather knew he would pop up again and she wondered which door he was waiting behind.

She didn’t want to walk but her legs made the decision for her. They moved her forward until she was standing in front of the first door. Heather didn’t want to be alone and she almost wished Billy back. She would have preferred the presence of evil over the secrets and shame that awaited her.

Heather reached out and placed her hand on the doorknob. She wondered if she could run back the way she had come but she stood her ground. Facing herself had always been her destiny so running was futile. Heather pushed the door inward and closed her eyes.

Chapter 25

The Red

Heather walked inside and was blanketed by darkness. She couldn't see what awaited her and would have chosen to remain in the dark given the choice.

She reached her hand inside only deep enough to find a light switch. She spread her fingers across the surface and wished her arms were a little longer.

"Go-Go Gadget Arms," she whispered.

Her fingers finally touched a switch and she flicked it upward as she held her breath. Light filled the room, igniting every corner except for one. Heather knew that whatever awaited her waited in the corner.

A sofa sat in the middle of the room. It looked familiar but she couldn't identify it. She started to walk toward the couch but stopped abruptly when she heard a door opening from the dark corner. Heather was shocked to see her mother step through the blackness and her heartbeat took another break

Despite the tears that ran down her cheeks, Laurie looked beautiful, as always. She was so pretty that Heather filled with pride whenever her mother came to her school. Her long blonde hair and striking features grabbed the attention of all the girls and boys in the classroom and Heather felt a sense of validation whenever she introduced Laurie as her mom.

Heather would have been happier to see her if were not for the tears and the fact that Laurie was oblivious to her daughter's presence. Her mother brushed past her and headed for the lonely couch. Heather took comfort in Laurie's perfume and in her strong presence and she longed to just be safe in her mother's arms.

She wanted to embrace the woman who had given her so much more than life. She wanted to hug her tightly and extract the identity of the person who had hurt her. Heather tried to walk but realized she couldn't take another step. As she tried to propel her body forward, a telephone rang from a small table beside the sofa.

Heather wondered if she was the only one who heard ringing but realized that both of their worlds were privy to the incoming call when Laurie lifted the receiver

"Hello?" asked her mother; the pain in her voice difficult to listen to.

Heather stood frozen she listened to her own voice pouring angrily out of a speaker system she couldn't see. Her tone was loud and sarcastic and Heather felt the shame begin in her stomach.

"Do you think you have a right to talk to me about mothering?"

She heard the question she had asked her mother years before and remembered the argument. It had been a terrible one and Heather couldn't believe she'd ever spoken this

way to her mother. Reliving the moment from third person wasn't nearly as satisfying as it had been in first person. The guilt was contagious and beginning to affect every inch of her.

Heather watched her mother brush away a new tear and wanted desperately to go to her but she didn't have the power to move forward. She was unsure why she'd been stricken immobile but had a feeling she knew which room she was in. The rage simmering inside told her that her own wrath was about to unfold before her.

"Heather," Laurie choked out between tears. "I can't believe the things you say to me. If I ever talked to my mother like this . . ."

"Oh, you're such a martyr, aren't you, Mom?" Heather heard herself yell.

She cringed when she heard her already high-pitched tone climbing even higher. Her voice sounded patronizing and syrupy and mean and Heather seriously considered putting her hands over her ears to block out anymore of it.

"You're so self-sacrificing, I know," the past Heather continued.

Present Heather was disgusted with the past one and she became frustrated by her inability to smack herself in the face.

It was like watching a movie and trying to guide the lost star to a safe end. She silently rooted her mother on while she easily accepted herself as the bad guy. She didn't know how she was supposed to resolve anything if she couldn't move. She was trying to reach her sins but something was stopping her.

"We should all remember what a saint you really are, shouldn't we?" Her past voice was snarling.

Heather wanted to go to her mother to wipe the tears away and apologize. She wanted to tell her mother how sorry she was for having been so bad to her. She wanted to repent for all the times she had snuck out her window and whispered vows of hate and screamed hateful things at her. She wanted to scream a million apologies but still, she was forced to stay in one spot.

Heather wanted to tell her mom she didn't know why she had blamed her for so many things beyond one woman's control. She wanted to tell her she knew how protective she had always been and that sometimes bad things just happen. She wanted to tell her she was all right, that she had found her way through the anger and had made it to the other side. She wanted to tell her mom it wasn't her fault. Mostly, she just wanted to tell her mother she loved her.

Heather had succumbed too many times to the anger and vengeance that taunted her. She had learned with Dr. Angel that revenge only allowed her to have company in her suffering. It didn't take away the pain. Anger had stolen her energy and her dignity. It visited unannounced and stayed well after it had worn out its welcome. Heather's wrath was one of her greatest sins and she knew she had to just surrender it back to the universe.

Her legs moved. She pushed forward and understood the lesson. Her rage had prevented

her from moving forward in her life too. It served as an barrier between Heather and everyone she'd ever loved.

She walked slowly. She tried to walk fast but it felt like she were pushing her way through water. It didn't stop her from trying. She was closer to Laurie and she reached out to try to touch her.

"Mom!" she yelled. Her voice wasn't as loud as she had wanted it to be and the volume was beyond her control. She was surprised that her mother heard her.

Laurie approached Heather and brushed tears away. Heather knew how much her mother loved her. She only wish Laurie knew how much she loved her back; how much she admired the person she was and how proud she was of everything she had achieved.

Laurie had been a good mother and Heather never let the poor woman make a mistake without broadcasting it back to her for many years. As Heather aged and learned to be a mother to her own teenager, she began to realize so many things. Among them was that her mother was more patient, more creative and more loving than any mother she had ever met.

Heather needed to find out where her perpetual anger came from so she crossed the room to take her mother's hand. She wanted for them to do it together.

When tears fell from her eyes, Heather didn't wipe them away. She felt she owed it to Laurie to allow a shared cry.

"I'm so sorry, Mom," she whispered into Laurie's blonde hair.

Laurie tightened the squeeze and when it ended, both looked at the staircase that had appeared in the corner. They walked slowly toward it and climbed the steps together, their hands clasped tightly. Heather drew courage from her mother's touch.

A new wave of fear washed over Heather with each step they took. She thought about lions, and tigers and bears and wondered what kind of animal waited for them at the top. She felt a difference with each step and realized when she reached the top that she had lost a year on every stair. By the end, Heather was five years old again.

A large mirror greeted them at the top and their reflections belonged to the people they used to be. Heather's hair had long finger curls and ribbons made of silk. Her mother had spent hours putting the curls in her hair before church every Sunday. Heather remembered the safety she felt during those moments and she longed to feel it again.

Laurie's reflection stared back through the vibrant blue eyes of a young woman. Her skin was smooth, her eyes were smoky, and her mouth was full, just as she remembered from her childhood. Laurie had a sweetness to her that balanced out the seductress she had been. She was the perfect balance of wife, mother and playmate.

Laurie took Heather's hand and carefully led the way. Heather forgot how good it felt to bask in her mother's protective presence and wondered if she could choose to stay in that moment with her forever.

"Stay behind me," Laurie whispered.

Her mother refused to pass her own fears onto her children. She worked hard to keep them from knowing the things that scared her. Although claustrophobic, Laurie's fear had never prevented her from climbing into an elevator and riding to the top of a building. And somehow, she hid her fear the whole way up. Her mother would paste on a phony smile and hum a happy tune while she quietly counted her palpitations.

With little feet, Heather hid behind her mother and held onto the belt of her skirt. She felt strange as she experienced the emotions of a girl and a woman at the same time.

"What, Mommy? Who's in there?" she whispered back, her tiny finger pointing to the door they'd stopped in front of.

"I don't know, honey. Go hide in the closet," Laurie whispered loudly as she pointed to a door across the hall. Heather sensed the panic in her voice and knew her mom was afraid. Though she was close to Heather's true age, it was impossible to see her mother as a peer.

"I don't want to," Heather said firmly. "I don't want to hide anymore."

The first line came from the child Heather but the second came from the grown up inside.

"Stay behind me, honey. It'll be all right," Laurie said as she reached for the doorknob.

Heather held her breath while her mother turned the knob and wondered if a person could pass out from the lack of oxygen.

The door opened wider and Heather kept her fingers twisted into the back of her mother's waist and her knuckles ached with the muscles she exerted. She followed her mother into the room.

Noises came from another dark corner and they both stopped in their tracks. Heather grunted from the abrupt slam into her mother's rear end.

"Mommy?" she whispered.

Laurie didn't respond so Heather worked up the courage to peek around her body again. She moved her head slowly until she could see what was in Laurie's line of vision. Paralysis seized her just as it had her mother.

They watched a scene from the past. It was the scene that Heather had struggled for so long to remember and now that she saw it, she wished she hadn't. Heather and her sisters sat on top of a waterbed that was dressed in a purple velvet bedspread. They were all dressed in nightgowns that were too sexy for most adults and their fresh young faces were made up, seemingly by a hooker. Their hairstyles reflected the seventies with long layered feathers that were sprayed to perfection.

They were a little angry and very scared. The object of their fear wasn't far away. A young man faced the girls but had his back to Heather and Laurie. She could tell from his posture that he was holding a camera.

"Very good," he praised one of them. "You're such a seductive child."

Heather remembered the voice. As an adult, she heard how it dripped with sleaze and a lack of control.

“Remember how I told you girls to pose?” he asked.

The girls nodded but remained silent as the pedophile moved to the side, blocking Heather’s current line of vision. She didn’t mind. She didn’t want to see anymore anyway.

She didn’t want to focus on the scene before them because she had already lived it. All she ever needed was to believe herself that something had really happened to them. She didn’t need to see what the camera flashed on. She saw the tattoo of a dragon on his right bicep and she remembered his sickly presence. Curtis Knight, friend to all children, had been bad man. It was all she needed to know.

Heather saw the horror on her mother’s face and knew she had never even suspected. Curtis was young and handsome and he had known the right words to say. The neighborhood parents trusted him because no child ever gave them reason not to. Instead, they grew into drug addicts, bulimics and suicides.

Heather noticed something hanging from her mother’s skirt pocket and she snatched it. It was a gold pocket watch and Heather wondered where it came from. She looked at its face and saw the hands were parked at 11:11. She knew it meant it was time to leave but she wasn’t ready yet.

Heather wanted to strip her mother of the guilt and herself of the rage that Curtis had created through his selfish and gutless acts. She knew if her mother had even suspected, she would have tortured the pervert to death before his arraignment.

Heather pushed the minute hand back slightly and took Laurie’s hand into hers. She smiled and her mother returned it with a smile of her own. Heather placed her head on Laurie’s shoulder and inhaled through her nose. Her mother’s neck always smelled so good and felt so warm.

“I love you, Mom. I’m sorry for the times my anger hurt you,” Heather said softly.

Tears stung the back of her eyeballs and she willed them to just fall so that the pain and pressure would be alleviated. She closed the lids for a moment to let the protective wetness seep in. When she opened them again, her mother was gone.

Heather looked around the room. There was no longer a staircase and no longer a pedophile. There was also no more Mommy there to protect her.

Another door appeared and Heather knew she had earned her way out of the room. She walked toward it slowly and told herself the first one hadn’t been that bad.

Chapter 26

Nymphetamine

Heather stood at the door and hesitated before touching the knob. It didn't buy her the time she was hoping for because the door opened in apparent expectation of her arrival. She lingered in the doorway, her right hand firmly holding the jamb, her left one catching her forehead when her neck muscles weakened under the strain of fear. She remained in the spot until her body began working properly and all functioning restarted.

At the touch of her first footfall, music started blasting through speakers she couldn't see. The Four Seasons belted out *Oh, What A Night*, a tune that had always instilled good feelings in her. Heather's comfort level began to rise, despite the terror she knew the room might hold. A strange magnetic draw lured her in deeper and she found she didn't want to fight its power.

She made it about halfway through when nightclub lights flooded the room and showed Heather she was on a dance floor. She was surrounded by people dancing and had to walk carefully so that she didn't run into them. Although they didn't acknowledge her presence with eye contact or any other interaction, the other patrons subtly created a path that led Heather straight to the bar.

When she got there, she laid her elbows on the cold surface. The energy level in the room was contagious and she could feel her nerves adjusting to the tempo of the music. She'd almost forgotten that she hadn't arrived with friends or that she was in Hell's lobby. Her fingers beat the song onto the bar while she waited for service.

"What can I get for you?" a deep voice asked.

The bartender was about six foot one and he had a head full of dark curls. His eyes were a piercing blue and his dimples reminded her of Antonio Banderas.

As he flirted with her, Heather looked around with growing confusion. She wondered if she had accidentally walked through the door to paradise and envisioned angelic bodyguards coming to toss her out. Glancing around nervously, she prayed the mistake wouldn't be caught until she'd at least had a drink.

"Long Island iced tea, please," she answered with a smile and a wink.

Heather told herself there was no threat here and became gleefully complacent, allowing herself to believe what she wanted to believe. The id inside was vying to take control and Heather relaxed in the knowledge that her superego would rush in and save her when the time came. To the devil on one shoulder, she was playful and attentive but to the angel on the other, she was neglectful and tried to shake off its existence.

The delicious bartender poured several liquors into a glass of waiting ice and placed it in front of her. She nodded her thanks and took a long sip.

“What would you like on the side?” he asked.

Heather noticed that he even sounded like Antonio

Banderas and she warmed up to him without the barriers that were usually present. His question surprised her. Nobody had ever offered her a side with a cocktail.

“Come again?” she asked.

The bartender reached out to take her hand and Heather felt electricity at his touch. His sexiness was ridiculous and it made direct contact with her libido. Slowly and teasingly, he opened her fingers and placed a menu in her hands.

“I’m not hungry,” she pouted.

He started to laugh and Heather felt suddenly naive. Innocence was a rare feeling for her and she liked it. When she looked down at the menu, disbelief took hold. The menu listed every drug known to man and each one had an expensive price. The prices weren’t monetary and Heather felt a shiver at the base of her spine as she read them. She was starting to understand the room and she became anxious about what else, or who else, might pop up.

Listed under the appetizers were addictive medications like Percocet and Xanax. It amused Heather because she had always joked around about wanting to find a restaurant that specialized in drugs. She was tempted to order a pain killer and an anti-anxiety pill just to deal with the rest of the room but instead just perused the strange menu more. She hoped to find a clue that would tell her the significance of the room before her need for excess took over and she started ordering.

Under the salads were pictures and descriptions of various types of marijuana. Heather instinctively looked around the bar for police and saw none. She decided their presence probably wasn’t conducive to the lesson and therefore, their images hadn’t even been created. When she checked out the entrees, pictures of cocaine and alcohol promised her a good time. Heather felt her resistance starting to break as she shifted blame to the One who put her in the room.

The dessert section was the only area where real food existed. Though she hadn’t suffered the consequences of an unmanageable sweet tooth, Heather noticed the confections she did crave were the only ones listed. Red velvet cake, dark chocolate nuggets and cherry cheesecake called out to her taste buds. She ordered nothing because she feared that her acceptance of anything on the naughty menu would initiate a negative spiral of events. She held tightly to her resistance as the room began to suck away all of her inhibitions.

Heather caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror behind the bar. She was shocked to see that her hair fell into long shiny curls, past her shoulders and down her back. She might have been mistaken for beautiful if her face weren’t indistinguishable. She looked like the guardian angel her friends had seen hovering around. She was a goddess, an angel stuck inside a room full of temptation.

Heather felt a hand on her shoulder but she didn’t jump. It felt good because it quelled her

loneliness. She glanced down and saw it was rough, like the hands of a man chained to daily labor. The tattoo of a snake ran down the pointer finger of his right hand and ended in the middle of his palm. The sight of it caused Heather to gulp audibly. She had once loved a man with the same tattoo. When she finally gathered the courage to look, Heather directed her eyes to the man touching her.

“Oh my God,” she said.

He smiled the sexy half smile that she had fallen in love with as a teenager. Jake broke her heart when she was too young to understand boundaries and she had always credited her first love with her ugliest lessons. He had taught her the meaning of unfaithfulness and deception and she always knew that her penchant to hurt men came from her volatile relationship with him.

Heather’s heart pounded just as it did twenty years before. His hair was blacker than almost seemed possible and his eyes were still as dark as the night. He winked hello and Heather experienced a rush of the love she had for him so long ago. He had claimed her innocence and, for that alone, would always hold a special place in her heart.

“Why are you here?” she asked with a head tilt.

“I’m drinking,” he answered.

Jake casually swallowed a twelve ounce beer in one sip and the sight made recall easier. Heather had finally walked away from him because his love for alcohol and other women superseded his love for her. Right before their last break up, Jake got drunk and cuddled up to a beer keg instead of her. When she told him goodbye, the nozzle was still implanted in his mouth.

As usual, he turned his attention away from her and looked to the bartender.

“Bud bottle and an eight-ball, man,” he ordered.

“No problem, dude.”

The Banderas look alike handed her ex-boyfriend a small liquid bottle and Jake accepted it eagerly.

When she looked down, Heather noticed a dish of red velvet cake had been placed in front of her. She could tell it was moist by the deep red and the wet shine. Suddenly, she wanted to eat it badly. She became increasingly aware of her limitless desires and need to have what she wanted immediately.

“Hey baby, remember this?” Jake asked.

He held up the tiny bottle and she knew right away it held Rush, the inhalant they used to sniff as rebellious kids. She clearly remembered the feeling of the forced palpitations and the boost of energy that drove her nerves from zero to sixty in a millisecond.

“Come on,” he goaded. “Do it.”

Heather smiled as a new realization started to sink in. Even when she didn't want something, she still took it to excess. Moderation had never been her forte and boundary pushing may as well have been her major in college. She had never really learned the power of just saying no and subsequently, her life had taken many difficult turns.

Jake laughed and lifted the vial up to his nose. A brief sniff later, he staggered dizzily a short distance from his chair. The bartender laughed along with him and Heather's fingers itched to grab the bottle. She wanted to have fun too.

"Watch out, man," the bartender laughed. "That shit kills a lot of brain cells."

Jake gathered himself together and looked at Heather with feigned concern.

"Careful baby, you've only got three left," he said laughing.

He and the bartender shared a hearty laugh and Heather shook her head with a smile. It was typical for Jake to use her as a target for his jokes. If he had contributed anything positive to her life, it would probably be the ability to laugh at herself.

"Thanks," she said.

As she watched the fun they were having, her inhibitions moved out one by one. The mature and emotionally developed part of her would have told her that she didn't really want to sniff it but that part wasn't home.

Heather picked up her drink and chugged it like a sorority girl. She grabbed the cake with her hand and shoved it into her mouth, ignorant of the crumbs that dropped into her lap and frosting that smeared onto her face. She didn't feel control over her actions anymore and the need to take everything she wanted was becoming stronger than her.

She grabbed the bottle from Jake's hand and sniffed at the top of it the way she used to. She was assaulted by the sweet chemical scent and immediately felt the blood rush to her brain as it looked for oxygen to steal. Heather jumped down from her chair so that she could feel the effects of the drug and all three of them laughed like children when her foot caught on the chair and pulled her to the floor. As her old boyfriend helped her up, the bartender slammed three shots of vodka onto the bar and raised his in the air for a toast.

"To having it all," he said loudly.

Heather raised her small glass and drank to the selfish vow. An ache in her stomach told her the cake hadn't settled right and the nausea that crept in reminded her why sipping was preferable to gulping. She felt the need to vomit and sat back down in hopes the inaction would alleviate her symptoms.

Jake was back on the stool next to her and he pulled her toward him. Memories of old feelings marched into her heart like a parade. She wanted him just the way she did so many years before and with no concern of reciprocation, she reached out to touch his face. He placed his hand over hers and Heather noticed a ring, loud and shiny, glaring at her from her left finger. She pulled back, confused.

Realization waded through the emotional moat she had surrounded herself with and

blanketed her conscious mind with new information. She was married and the stinging shame of her intentions caused her to pull back quickly.

“I can’t,” she said firmly. “I’m married.”

“So, what?” he asked.

“He hurt you, didn’t he?”

“You hurt me but I’m standing here with you right now,” she answered defensively.

“I never hit you, Heather. He doesn’t deserve you,” Jake insisted.

As she listened, she realized he was just regurgitating all of the justifications she’d fed herself through the years. Coming from someone else, the excuses sounded ridiculous and she was overcome with embarrassment. Heather had always sought the unattainable. She wanted to have her cake and eat it too and tried to do so daily. When she wanted something she knew she shouldn’t have, she always found a way to make it feel right

“Yes, he hurt me,” she said finally. “But I can’t justify cheating on him because of it. I could have left.”

“It’s not that easy,” he complained.

“You know that.” He tried to pull her toward him but she pushed him away. The bartender stopped fiddling around behind the bar and he tuned into the drama unfolding around him. Heather wondered if the man had ever been real or if he were only a figment of her imagination, created by God for the sole purpose of teaching her the painful consequences of gluttony.

“It’s not supposed to be,” Heather realized out loud. “We’re not supposed to take the easy way out. I chose to do that because I wanted to have it all. I cheated and I lied and I hurt people because I didn’t want to lose anything. I didn’t want to grieve.”

Her voice became quiet, as though a higher decibel might wake up the cries inside her. It was hard to hold back the tears in the face of such bad choices. The guilt of her infidelities and overuse of everything unhealthy finally set in and it was a disgusting feeling.

Heather had loved both of her husbands fiercely. When they hurt her, she had been crushed but even knowing that the respect and trust were forever gone, she still refused to let go of either one. She needed them to maintain a place in her life so she wouldn’t have to truly suffer the loss of her marriages. She knew the constant contact hurt them and prevented them from moving on but she did it anyway and turned a blind eye to the pain it caused. She had used their weaknesses to justify her own sins and she wondered how she’d be able to forgive herself for it.

The nausea returned and the bartender slammed another shot down in front of her.

“No,” Heather whispered. She held her stomach as though the act would prevent the contents from flowing out.

“Baby,” Jake said in a comforting voice. “You deserve to have it all. Stop worrying about everyone else.”

He didn't mean the words he spoke. His eyes were sad and in their reflection, Heather saw pain.

He stuffed a chocolate into her mouth without warning and she lurched forward to vomit. Nothing came out and she was stuck with the need to throw up but the inability to do it. Dry heaves took the place of real release and Heather finally realized what was happening.

She had wanted it all and it was exactly what she was getting. She carried inside of her the remnants of the drugs and alcohol she had used for a false sense of peace. Also encased in her emotional capsule were the memories of the men she had hurt. Her sudden inability to remain ignorant of the damage it caused heightened the nausea. Heather's lack of self-control and self-discipline turned to life inside her stomach and begged to come out. She just didn't know how to let it go.

Heather opened her eyes to find that she was surrounded by every man she had ever slept with. The men lined the bar and they filled the booths, all focusing their attention on the faceless redhead desperately trying to puke. Upon another wave of nausea, Heather felt a familiar dirtiness settle in and she looked at Jake with fury.

“This is your fault,” she blamed.

As usual, accountability hadn't been allowed entrance into her blocked heart and she sought with fervor to place it someplace else.

“My fault?” he laughed. “Don't you think you avenged that one a long time ago?”

“What?” she asked.

She didn't understand what he meant until he directed his finger toward the quiet guy at the end of the bar. Without explanation, Jake simply pointed at his brother sitting alone. Jake's brother stared at them before lifting his glass. He nodded and sent a silent toast across the distance of the bar.

Heather dropped her head in shame. She had indeed evened the score a long time before and had no right to point fingers at anyone. He hurt her and she took comfort from his brother in ways that were neither appropriate nor acceptable. She had torn their family apart and then walked away, ignoring the lifetime of destruction she had caused.

“I'm sorry,” she cried softly.

The bartender tapped her on the shoulder and Heather turned toward him. He was trying to hand her the menu again but she shook her head fervently. He laid it down and pushed it toward her and Heather looked more closely at the prices she had only scanned when she first arrived. She wished she had paid attention to them years before.

The price for the marijuana was a lack of motivation and the price for cocaine was everything she owned. Luckily, the latter wasn't an item she had often ordered and had been fortunate to have not been required to pay such an expensive tab

What caught her eye next was the price next to the medications. It was an item she had requested year after year without ever paying attention to the fee. The listed cost of years spent hiding in a prescription bottle was her children and Heather's heart pounded with the knowledge of what she had taken from them.

"No!"

She screamed at the bartender and pushed the menu with such force that it fell behind the bar. Images of her boys filled her mind and she could almost hear their laughter as she tickled them and wrestled with them at bedtime. She wanted to freeze frame the moment but she started backing away from the memories of them and she couldn't stop herself.

Heather watched their little faces fall as she walked backwards, further and further away from them. She couldn't stop. She had taken away from them so that she could self-medicate and the yearning for all she'd missed felt as if it would strangle her.

The pills had stolen the energy her children were entitled to and had enclosed her in the shell of a mother who refused to allow herself to feel. Grief welled up in her chest and she understood how her excessive behaviors had taken away their moments together.

She remembered, with sadness, all the times she prayed to God and begged for the gift of appreciation. She had cursed His inability to bless her with gratitude instead of realizing He'd been offering it all along. She just hadn't accepted it because of her need for more. She hadn't grasped the meaning of sacrifice and, therefore, hadn't been able to truly enjoy what was right in front of her.

Each tear that fell came from the sea of understanding within. The smell of Jack's hair and the sound of Tommy's voice was all she cared about. It had always been available and it had always been free. Heather used their images and their memories to draw strength and she faced her first lover.

"What time is it?" she asked Jake gently.

"It's 11:11," he answered, never even glancing at his watch.

"It's time for me to go," Heather said apologetically.

He smiled and reached out to caress her cheek. He ran his fingers down the length of her face.

"This was always my favorite part of you," he said. He started to fade and Heather realized the bartender had already disappeared. A new door presented itself across the room and she reached out quickly to touch Jake before he was completely gone. She had left so much of herself with him and finally felt as though she had gotten it back. She walked toward the unwelcoming door with a hand to her heart.

Chapter 27

This Woman's Work

The third door was more difficult to gain entry into. It opened but offered so much resistance that Heather heard herself grunt as she pushed harder against it. She imagined a monster pressing on it from the other side and then cursed her vivid imagination.

When the reluctant door finally opened, Heather found herself standing in a cold, sterilized room. The walls were a dull gray and the shiny instruments sitting in a nearby medical tray didn't induce positive energy. Heather noticed a lonely cot in the corner and felt a sharp pain in her abdomen. She grabbed at it with both hands and when she brought them back up, the tips of her fingers dripped with dark blood. Heather screamed.

"What's wrong, dear?"

A short pudgy nurse ran into the room wearing an expression of concern. Absorbing her medical attire, Heather darted her eyes around the room, suspecting she knew where she was. She had stood in that same spot before and every emotion she'd experienced seventeen years before came rushing back at her. Heather shook her head back and forth as if she hoped it would shake away the scene before her.

"Oh, no," she panted.

"God, I can't. I can't do this." She bent over and placed her hands on her knees as she tried to catch her breath.

"Dear, it's too late. It's over and you were very brave," the nurse said sweetly.

"No!" Heather screamed.

She couldn't re-experience the dreadful place, no matter what the consequences. She told herself it was a mistake. She had traveled too far and accidentally opened the door to Hell.

Heather stood upright and attempted to walk toward the cot. The pain was almost debilitating upon her first step and she stopped to scream again.

"Oh, make it stop please," she whispered through the sharp pains.

Heather referred not as much to the sensation of an ice pick being shoved inside of her as to the black hole where her heart used to be.

"Come sit down, dear," offered the kind nurse.

She hurried to Heather's side and gently guided her to the cot. After placing a cold, damp rag on her forehead, she played with her hair until her patient started to breathe normal again.

"Now, what's gotten you so worked up again?" she asked.

"Where's my baby?" Heather cried.

The nurse shook her head and then bowed sadly. When she looked back up, Heather saw the compassion in her eyes and she knew where it came from.

“Your baby is gone, dear,” she said softly. “Gone where?” Heather screamed.

“You killed her, dear. Don’t you remember?” she asked.

The sweet voice stating such ugly words was a disturbing contrast.

“Why?” Heather sobbed.

Her cries were uncontrollable and they lasted for a long time. She didn’t flinch when she noticed the digital clock on a corner table flashing 11:11. She would have been surprised if it had been stuck on any other time. Instead, she turned her attention to the nurse again.

“Why did I do this?” Heather asked again, more quietly.

The nurse stared back in confusion.

“Because you loved somebody else more, dear,” she answered, patting Heather on the knee “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Yes, there is!” Heather retorted angrily. “Who would I have loved more than my own child?”

She knew a mistake had been made because she would never choose anyone or anything over the life of a baby.

“You, dear,” the nurse said suddenly serious. “You loved yourself more.”

And Heather remembered. She clearly recalled the time in her life when no other alternatives presented themselves and she had justified her decisions. Hindsight showed her many options that she was blind to at the time. She didn’t want to lose the life she had envisioned for herself and her desires had taken precedence over the life inside of her.

Heather placed her hand on the spot where a lump would have eventually formed.

“This is why I lost my daughter, isn’t it?” she asked, referring to the decision she had no control of. She sniffled and exhaustion started to seep in.

“That’s what you’ll convince yourself but it’s not the way of it dear,” the nurse answered.

“It’s not?”

“No, silly girl,” she said.

“He doesn’t work that way. We punish ourselves way more than He could ever punish us.”

Heather had a vision of the nurse as an angel with wings and a halo. She looked down at her blood saturated gown and back up at the nurse.

“Why am I bleeding so badly?” Heather asked, though she noticed the pain subsiding as their conversation progressed.

“It’s because you’ve never forgiven yourself, honey. We bleed on the inside until we find a

way to let go of the guilt. Are you ready to finally let go?"

"No! I'll never forgive myself! I'll never let go of the self-hatred!" she yelled.

"Then you will continue to bleed," shrugged the nurse.

"I don't care. I deserve more than bloodshed," Heather insisted.

She crossed her arms and turned away from the possibility of anymore kind words.

"But how will you save the world when you are so weak? How will you even make it to the next door?" she asked.

"I'll find a way," Heather said firmly.

She struggled to stand up from the cot and jolted in pain. The blood between her legs began to flow more heavily and she knew she wouldn't make it two steps. She sat down again and bent over to sob into the arms she folded on her lap.

"It's okay to cry, dear. You're supposed to cry," she nurse said.

She rubbed Heather's back and encouraged her to release the pent up guilt and shame. When she finished, the nurse lifted her chin up and looked into her eyes.

"Would you die for your sons, Heather?" asked the chubby woman.

"In a heartbeat," she answered without hesitation. "I would give my life a hundred times over if it meant five extra minutes of happiness for either one of them.

"Then that's all," she smiled. "Your constant self-punishment is bad for all those who love you. Don't let your pride win again. Cross this room and go through that door."

The nurse pointed her finger at a spot across the room. When Heather followed her target, she saw that a door had appeared on the far side.

She wanted to bring the nurse with her. She wanted to wrap herself into the woman's warmth and allow the kind lady to guide her in the right direction but she knew she couldn't. It was her path alone to walk and she had no choice but to walk it.

She looked down and saw that the blood was gone. Heather moved one leg forward as she told herself that nothing could be worse than the room she had just conquered.

Chapter 28

Smooth Criminal

Heather chanted the whole way to the next door.

“God, don’t leave me,” she repeated over and over again. The mantra continued to whisper itself into the corners of her mind even after she stopped consciously saying it.

The newest door had many locks and Heather stared at each one of them. She counted as she unlocked them and discovered there were eleven.

She jumped at the each sound she made. Every time she applied pressure to a resistant lock, it made a screeching sound like nails on a chalkboard.

Heather finally pushed opened the door and she squinted into the darkness that waited for her. Enough light shone through an unknown crack and Heather realized she had walked into a bedroom. She tried to trace the origin of the faded light and discovered it came from a window on the opposite wall. Had the shade been up, the room would have become as bright as the outdoors but it wasn’t. The blue shade had been drawn tightly and taped at the sides. Somebody had gone to pains so that they didn’t have to see the world.

Heather still didn’t understand. The bed made her think it was related to lust but something didn’t feel right about the theory. She didn’t feel sex nearby. She felt the onset of grief and it was both familiar and recent.

She looked around to see what she could determine from the items in the room. It didn’t take long for her observations to answer her questions.

A collection of hats dressed up the wall over the bed. They looked like the hats of a fisherman. They were cute and goofy and spoke of a man who appreciated nature and loved life. A compass sat at the end of the bed and she pictured a Boy Scout packing up for camp.

Heather looked at the dresser and quickly changed her mind when she saw that three lines of white powder had been carefully carved out. They sat expectantly, waiting for their owner to show them some attention. A razor accompanied the lines and all of it reflected back from the mirror they laid on.

The hats, the cocaine and the bedroom belonged to Benny and Heather felt a stab of fear at the realization. She was afraid of what she had walked into and she started to look around desperately for the door that would lead her back out. At the sound of footfalls in the hallway, her banging heart started knocking against her chest.

Heather flattened her back against the wall when Benny walked through the door. She knew he couldn’t see her but still she felt as though she had just been discovered. Her first impulse was to scan the room for the dreaded weapon. She hoped she hadn’t been trapped in his room on the most fateful of days but knew deep down that she had. There

would have been no other reason for her to be there though she wasn't sure why Benny's suicide had ended up being one of her sins.

Heather saw what she was looking for and her violent heart stopped beating altogether. The gun was laying beside the telephone on the nightstand by his bed. She ran past him, planning to pick it up and hide it. She visualized smashing the evil weapon to pieces or setting it aflame until it no longer existed but she couldn't even lift it. Like a clumsy ghost trying unsuccessfully to haunt a family, she discovered she had no power over the gun or over anything else in the room.

Heather looked at Benny and tears filled her eyes. She reached her hand out toward him, wanting desperately to feel the heat of his skin as it penetrated through his sleeve but felt nothing but pain exploding inside. She dropped her head into her hands but looked up again quickly when she heard a long snorting sound.

Benny was leaning over the coke with a carelessly cut straw held to his nose. He snorted two lines and held his head back to sniff it all in. He put his hand to his nose to assist the process and picked up a glass of wine that she hadn't noticed on the corner of the dresser.

Benny walked to his bed and sat on the edge. He lifted the cell phone from its position beside the gun. As he dialed, Heather said a prayer. God must not have heard her because her cell phone started to ring and when she looked at the caller ID, she saw Benny's name displayed.

"Oh, no," she said. Her heart widened in anticipation of more guilt.

She tried to answer the phone but it wouldn't work.

"No, no, no," she said desperately as she pressed repeatedly on her talk button. Finally, the ringing stopped and she saw Benny's head fall a little as he listened to the familiar sound of her voicemail.

"Hey Heather, what's up?" he said into the phone. She had only heard the words in the past and had never known what he was doing at the time. He left her the message that she had listened to so many times. She had never experienced the call from this side before and she decided that it was even worse, much worse. Heather mouthed the words as he spoke them.

"You haven't called me back," he continued. "I thought maybe you could come over tonight and we could grill some food and hang out. I miss you, girl, give me a call."

Benny hung up and shook his head. Heather heard a small noise escape him and she realized he was crying. The grief started to grab hold of her and she tried to fight it. She couldn't let herself get carried away by depression before she even got the chance to discover which lesson she was there to learn.

She had felt such guilt after Benny's suicide and now she tried to reconcile what she had always known. The truth had gotten lost amid her sadness. Now it swam at the edges of her awareness but Heather couldn't quite touch the answer. She looked around again.

She wanted to search the room until she saw something that made sense and knew she didn't have much time. Benny had already picked up the telephone.

Heather whipped her attention over to the clock that she knew sat on his table. It read 11:09 and she wasn't any closer to the answer than she had been when she walked in. Two more minutes would be too late.

She went to his bed and noticed something on the comforter and picked it up. A picture of her, Benny and Angie stared back at her, reminding her how close they had all been once. She glanced over at Benny and watched as he placed his hand on the gun. The cell phone was already up to his left ear and he was starting to position the weapon at his right temple.

She felt the tears as they soaked her face. Heather looked at the clock, and saw that it had clicked another minute away. It read 11:10, only a minute before the Grim Reaper of self-loathing showed up.

Heather had professed her friendship to Benny. She had told him she would always be there for him but she hadn't been. Benny thought he was all alone and he couldn't talk to his friends because they didn't always respond. The guys told him to get over it and the girls coddled him until they burned out and felt the need to start avoiding him.

Benny wanted to talk about his pending divorce and his fear of losing his mind, topics too heavy at times for her to delve into. He wanted to wonder aloud if a future would ever be possible without his family and Heather had told him it was. Then when the time came and he reached out to her for help, she had ignored him.

It hadn't been because she was terribly busy as she had told everyone else. It wasn't because she wanted to spare him the tedious details of her chaotic life as she had told herself. It was because she had been greedy. Heather offered herself to others and then withheld herself once they were hooked. She was like a drug dealer, giving away free samples of her time and her love before charging ridiculous prices. She did it to everyone she knew.

Heather had been so busy patting herself on the back for having never fallen prey to the monetary world that she hadn't seen the bigger picture. Greed wasn't always about money or possessions. Withholding her attention from those she loved had been the ultimate greed. It was her own, personalized form of selfish withholding and it hurt people worse – much worse. It caused resentment in her relationships and eventually led her down a road that ended in her friend's suicide.

Heather allowed others to tell her that Benny would have done killed himself anyway but she'd never really been convinced. She knew it may have just been a passing moment and that her response, or anyone's for that matter, could have changed everything.

Heather heard Benny's voice and looked up with only her eyes. They darted back to the clock and she both saw and heard another minute click away. It was 11:11 and she tried to numb out her senses before the shot rang out. Unable to dampen even one sensation, Heather had no choice but to watch and listen.

“Angie,” he whispered in a strained voice.

She pictured her petite friend on the other end, rolling her eyes at the pathetic call just the way she had. Heather thought about how badly Angie would want to rewind time and redo the phone call. Benny’s finger started to wiggle on the trigger.

“I love you and I’m sorry.” Heather listened to her friend’s last words and she tried to hold onto his voice.

Benny sucked in a deep breath and Heather knew it was the sound Angie would later try to describe to her. She watched as his pointer finger pulled back on the trigger and her eyes snapped shut at the sound of the gunshot. It was short and loud and Benny’s lifeless body slumped to the floor. Heather stared down at her dead friend and stopped the tears in the middle of their trek. She replaced them with a scream.

Heather kneeled by her friend’s body and dropped her head to his chest. She heard a rattle where his heart was and imagined it was the sound of its final break. A teardrop landed on her bottom lip and she didn’t wipe it away. Benny deserved her tears and she wouldn’t begrudge him that. She’d already taken enough from him by not answering his call. She knew she couldn’t have changed his ultimate decision to die but she also knew that answering the telephone would have created a different path for her. The one she had traversed was paved with a sense of guilt that had made healthy grieving impossible.

Heather pulled his hands into her own and realized she could still feel his warmth.

“I’m sorry, Benny,” she cried, kissing the back of his bloody hand. “I should have been there. So many times, so many people,” she stopped.

She cut herself off because the truth was overwhelming.

“I should have been there and I wasn’t and I’m sorry.”

Chapter 29

Sex and Candy

Heather walked up to the new door and was suddenly struck with paralysis. She didn't want to go in; she had had enough already. She wondered what would happen if she ran across to the other side and shuddered at the image of falling into a never-ending hole along the way.

Heather diverted herself with other thoughts as she took one step into the room. She thought about her death in the real world and wondered how the medical examiner's office would write it up. She knew it wouldn't be a massive coronary as suggested by the dream team. She had intentionally swallowed a lethal amount of medication and would be written up as an overdose. She didn't want to leave the world like that.

She imagined what was happening to Jade as she gave birth beside her dying sister. Squeezing tears back into the ducts from which they escaped, Heather told herself she could cry later and then a cold realization made her nerves jump and her body shake. There probably wouldn't be a later – not for her anyway.

Heather took another step inside and realized she had actually walked back into the hallway with the long red carpet. She had met each of the four doors on one side and now had to brave the last three on the other side. Heather walked up to the first of the three remaining doors and opened it without hesitation. She just wanted to get it over with and then crawl into her own comfy grave for a very long nap.

As she walked through, Heather realized she was outdoors. The weather was perfect. She was refreshed by a cool wind and tiny sprinkles of rain that gently pelted off of her skin. Ever since her father sat her on the front porch as a child to watch a bad storm, she'd loved the feeling of the wild breeze and the sound of angry thunder.

Heather was inexplicably drawn further outside. She feared the lesson that awaited her but allowed an unseen, seductive force to pull her in. The temptation that grew inside her was stronger than her sense of control and she couldn't resist venturing in deeper. She started to whistle and then thought it sounded funny when it seemed to get entangled and then lost in the wind.

A huge fig tree towered over everything in this new room outside. Heather walked slowly around the massive trunk in a steady circle. She pulled a loose piece of bark off the tree and delighted in the fresh, moist lump of dirt left in its wake in the middle of her palm. It was nature at its finest and its scent and sight reminded of Heather of a time when she cared about the environment. She drew strength from its mere existence.

"I guess you found me," she heard.

Billy voice drifted to her from the other side of the tree but she didn't jump when she heard him. She felt his presence the moment she walked through the door. He was the

only one who could be responsible for the suddenly quivering libido.

Heather wanted for him to believe she was unaffected by his presence and took her time walking in his direction. She walked a slow walk and whistled like a young girl, stopping only when she stood an inch from his face. They grinned at one another.

“Hi,” she said seductively and cocked her head to the side. “You’re here.”

“Always,” Billy answered.

His eyes smiled more than his mouth as he leaned his back against the tree and crossed his arms. He still wore the red bandana and its presence teased her even more than usual. She looked down and realized his body was almost fully exposed behind nothing but a fig leaf. A memory rushed back at her and Heather shooed it away. When she looked down at herself, she noticed her own attire was made from only the leaves of the tree and were only designed to cover her most private parts.

Heather felt something in her right hand and brought it up into her line of vision. It was an apple, red and crisp and inviting. She offered it to Billy and he put a hand up to say no.

“Why do you keep following me?” she asked teasingly.

They were close but their bodies didn’t touch. There seemed to be an invisible line keeping him on one side and her on another. Her knees felt rubbery and her eyes forgot to blink but her lower half was screaming for attention.

“You keep inviting me,” he finally answered as he eyed the apple she still held out to him.

She wanted to touch him, despite her hatred for him. She fought the urge to both kiss him and to break his nose. Heather was having a difficult time adjusting to the fact that Billy had never been a real man and she tried to remember who he was to her before her lifetime as Heather.

He stopped smiling and Heather wished he hadn’t. She preferred his fake laughter to the glare that threatened to burn a hole through her corneas.

“It’s not my fault,” she said. Though her mouth continued smiling, tears fell from her eyes.

She was ashamed to hear the whine and the lack of accountability in her voice but she couldn’t control either. A terrible wail bounced off of the walls and echoed menacingly. Although she was looking directly at him and she hadn’t seen him scream, Heather knew the terrible sound had come from Billy.

He shook his head back and forth with an expression of pity. His laughter echoed though the room though he was no longer laughing. Heather felt her own deliriousness try to transform itself into giggles but held it back with everything she had lest she and the devil fall into an eternal laughing contest.

It had always been easier to blame Billy in order to justify the affair. As long as it was his fault, it didn’t have to be Heather’s. The realization pushed her into a deeper awareness she’d never known.

A thought occurred to her.

“Wait. Why are you here? Lust was my biggest sin but there are still rooms left.”

His expression was blank and he had no reaction at all. His eyes were still sharp but gave no hint of what he was thinking or feeling, or if he were even capable of emotion.

Her heart banged against her chest so heavily, she feared he would hear it and know her terror. Her knees weakened under the stress and the small wobble caused a loss of balance, forcing her to a painful fall on her shins. The tumble only worsened with inertia and before she knew what was happening, she lay with her cheek on the cold pavement. She stayed very still and envisioned the scratches and the gravel she knew were imprinted on her face.

Billy reached down and offered his hand but she recoiled. Unconcerned by things such as permission, he grabbed her by her clenched fist and pulled her up. His hand was hot and strong and his grip tightened around her small fist. He pried open her fingers painfully to kiss the inside of her hand.

Billy's lip touched hers roughly. She made only small attempts to pull away from the harsh kiss and felt a burn as his five o'clock shadow scratched a path across her lips, cheeks and chin.

She didn't struggle when he picked her up and carried her to the base of the tree. He laid her on a soft bed of dirt at the foot of the trunk and Heather didn't fight him.

Her breathlessness was only a by-product of the new realizations seeping in. She knew her past decisions had led her to this room and would have opted for comfortable deceit over the truth if given the choice.

Billy kissed her again and she responded. She kissed down his neck and then let her lips linger at his chest. He had the familiar scent of musk and soap and his hair tickled her nostrils. She licked a spot below his nipple and smiled when his body jerked at the feel of her tongue.

Heather pulled herself back up and put her mouth on his but only teased a kiss. She brushed her lips across his and kissed the flesh all the way up to his ear.

Psychology would offer her the justification of an abused childhood but Heather wouldn't be persuaded to look elsewhere for fault. Entwining her fingers tightly into Billy's, she pulled her face back far enough to look into his eyes.

She took him in with all of her senses and her subconscious launched its own private investigation. Heather thought about the power of the human eye. Each part depended upon the other in order for it to work as a whole and it amazed Heather how everyone took their sight for granted. She hoped that if she looked deep enough, Billy's eyes would serve as windows to the next room.

The deep brown of his irises faded as Heather's focus pushed passed the surface level. She looked deep and saw more than she wanted. In his eyes, Heather saw the truth. The

faces of people she had cheated, lied to and hurt swarmed around her vision. She saw the men she had chosen and the wives they had ignored to be with her. She felt her guilt bringing them into existence and wanted to close her eyes to them so they would disappear forever.

Heather worried the images would materialize and a mob of angry women would stand before her, hands on their hips and vengeance in their hearts. She considered closing her eyes but knew her deepest problems lay in her ability to turn away from the truth. She wondered why it was Billy who had served as her object of the seductive sin for so long.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I was here first,” he said firmly.

Though she didn’t understand his words on a conscious level, a part of her comprehended exactly what he was saying to her. She remembered the perfection and the peace they had lived in together once but couldn’t yet remember the circumstances. She wondered if perhaps he had been a deceived husband from a past life who had never forgiven Heather her betrayals.

“Are you finally remembering?” he asked.

She closed her eyes and saw herself coming out of a beautiful blue lake with long red curls. The water was crystal clear and the sky above her was the sweetest baby blue she had ever seen. Heather watched the memory unfold and saw herself walking from the water toward a man under a tree. It was the same tree they were lying under.

Heather had languished in the purity and freshness of the fat drops of water that covered her body. In the memory, she watched herself walk from the water toward the tree but she still couldn’t make out the man who waited for her.

Heather squeezed her already closed eyes as she strained for clarity. She had been completely naked and completely comfortable in her nakedness. She held a hand toward him as she approached him under the same tree so long ago, just as she held the apple to Billy moments before. As she neared the man, his face became clearer and she saw that it was Billy who waited for her under the branches of the perfect tree.

He had been naked as well and she remembered the temptation that had grabbed hold of her as she walked out of the water. It had been strong and more powerful than she felt equipped to handle. There had been a heat and an attraction toward the man she had previously loved and it had existed without the bonds of sex or lust. It had been a new feeling and had grown with each step she took toward the fig tree. She reached him and held both hands in the air as she offered more than the innocent affections they had always known, more than she was allowed to offer.

She opened her eyes quickly and looked at the Billy who sat before her now. His face was the face she had always known. He was the one she had known first. It was the face of Adam, her first husband and the realization caused Heather to lose her breath.

She closed her eyes in an effort to calm herself but the image continued to play itself out.

As Adam, he had tried to resist her but he couldn't. He had responded to her and had taken what she had offered, committing the first sin, the ultimate sin together. She knew He had been watching and she felt the sting of shame but had fallen prey to the lust that was so much stronger.

When they had finished and were wrapped in each other's arms, a storm had taken over their perfect sky and the sea had rolled toward them angrily. The sight was an entity of its own and the image was the only recollection she had of her first father.

They had never known a storm until that moment and she knew it had come as a direct result of their forbidden intimacy. In her memory, she looked for the notorious snake and the infamous apple but saw neither. She knew they had only been analogies for the lust that God hadn't prepared for. There had been no devil and no unseen evil force aside from the sexual act they had committed. It had been their fault that the fate of humankind would have to pay for their priceless sins.

Heather saw nothing more. She didn't know what came after the storm or what had caused Adam to turn into the desperate and angry soul he had become. She didn't know where she had been since their time together so long before and she didn't care. Heather was reeling from the awareness and shocked that she had managed to forget it all.

Billy didn't respond but just stared at her and her heart ached for him. She had loved him so completely once. They had been forced to part ways for what they had done but that's all she remembered yet. Something wasn't revealing itself to her.

"There's no Satan, is there?" she asked.

He shook his head back and forth and let go of her hand, which he had been holding tightly throughout her internal show. She never let go of the eye contact but she backed slowly away from him. He didn't move to stop her and she knew she had taken back the power when she had discovered the truth. She stood up slowly and didn't panic when he mimicked her movements.

"Please, let go this time, Heather," he cried.

Tears fell from his eyes at the same time a door slammed open from the other side of the tree. She took a step toward him and wiped his tears away.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

Part of her didn't want to leave him but instinct told her it was time to go. She had learned enough and needed to deal with the rest of the rooms before her body died and her spirit floated away to places unknown.

She stepped backwards to move away from him and toward the door. The room hadn't cured her of her lust because her desire for him was still great but she refused to submit to the feeling. She finally had to force herself to break the stare as the last door beckoned. Her heart seized at the thought of what waited behind the door, secured with several thick locks. Heather realized someone had been serious about ensuring its continued closure and she was pretty certain that somebody was her.

She walked slowly toward the door and looked backwards when she was only a step away from it. She turned back to blow Billy a kiss goodbye. He caught it and closed it tightly in both hands.

“Bye, Billy,” she whispered softly.

Chapter 30

Hate Me

The temperature jumped from cold to hot to cold again with each step further into the house. She felt like the uninvited guest in the home of three absent bears, hoping to find a spot that was just right. The perfect spot welcomed her in a back room, just as it did Goldilocks. Heather allowed herself to become comfortable in a place she should have feared.

A light flashed on and she realized she was at the center of a circular room, and that mirrors surrounded her at every turn. No matter which direction she walked, at the end of each fifth step, the mirror ended and a new one began.

Each mirror had a light bulb at the top center that shed its own unique ray of light down upon its respective pane of glass. Heather watched herself in the mirrors as she paced back and forth, a harried expression and jerky movements marking each step. Suddenly, all of the light bulbs went out except for one. The one that remained still shone brightly and beckoned her attention. Heather didn't want to give it any but knew she didn't have a choice so she walked slowly toward the lit mirror.

As she neared its reflections, she realized it no longer spit back images of current time. No longer did she stare into her own terrorized eyes and tear-streaked face. Instead, she looked into the reflections of different times and different places throughout her life. When viewed one after another, the scenes began to tell her a story.

It was an ugly tale that detailed the perils of envy, one she should have paid attention to long before. It was bizarre to watch moments of her life through only the reflections of their memories. It was even more bizarre to learn that such an important lesson had been staring her in the face all along.

In the first mirror, Heather saw herself as a girl about four years old. She was peeking around the corner, spying on Lisa and their father. They were playing "I Spy" at the breakfast table, enjoying a bowl of Lucky Charms together, just the two of them. She watched how Lisa smiled, happy to be with her dad and proud that he had chosen to spend the time with her.

Heather watched as her own young eyes turned to thin slits of green. She was taken back by the bright color. The hue seemed uncomfortably symbolic of the sin she had obviously committed.

She donned the finger curls that her mom and grandmother had twirled out of thick, long strands. Heather felt a passing sense of shame when she watched herself crossing tiny arms and sticking out her bottom lip. She was obviously unhappy and the source of her discomfort wasn't hard to discern.

She watched as her child self patted her short red dress and tossed back her hair. She felt a stab of embarrassment as she watched herself jog into the kitchen, stealing attention from her

sister as she jumped into their father's lap. She flinched at her own delighted giggles and at her father's inability to share himself with more than one daughter at a time. She shrieked at the tickles he assaulted her with and he laughed at the adorableness of his middle child.

Heather shook her head back and forth before the mirror. She wanted to stop watching but couldn't help herself anymore than a rubbernecker at a car accident. She wanted to close her eyes to the image of herself snuggling up against his chest and nestling comfortably in his lap. She wanted to stop before she had a chance to see her ten-year-old sister saunter away.

The child inside of her wanted to ignore the consequences of her jealous decisions and just move on to the next mirror but the grown up inside knew she couldn't. The lesson wouldn't be absorbed until she'd felt the sting of her own actions. Ignorance wouldn't allow her to leave the room. Her heart was swallowed up by deep regret as she watched Lisa's once happy face fall flat. The little blonde, who had only wanted a small piece of her father, had simply bowed her head and slunk away unnoticed.

Heather didn't remember the jealousy until that moment. She truly believed she had escaped the trappings of envy so had never bothered addressing it. She had forgotten the stinging bite of wanting what another already had. It was only after she watched her big sister crying on the stoop of the staircase that she allowed herself to walk to the next mirror.

At the sixth step, the reflection changed and Heather stared back at herself as an older child. She walked up to her reflection and put a hand on the mirror. She looked into her ten-year-old eyes and saw excitement in the ones that stared back.

Her younger self was preening before her own mirror as she prepared for a party. The birthday girl cone hat she wore told her she was staring back at her tenth birthday party and she wondered what had happened that day that qualified for a lesson in envy.

She watched herself turn and run to the door after the doorbell ring. She saw herself open it to the most popular girls in her fifth grade class. She had invited only the prettiest and the most well-known that year after deciding that her own friends weren't good enough for her. She wanted the popularity and thought that surrounding herself with girls she didn't even like would help her get what she wanted.

The doorbell rang again and her mother opened it to the friends she had pushed away. Laurie had invited them anyway and Heather was furious. She didn't want their misfit ways affecting the life she was trying to take for herself so she ignored them.

Her focus was only on the best of the best and she was thrilled when, as a group, they handed her a box with a big bowtie. She had known what was inside immediately. The sheer yellow jacket that signified being one of them waited under mere cardboard and tissue. She watched herself open the present and stared open mouthed into the mirror as she watched her young selfish self allow only her new friends to help her into it.

"Oh my God," she gasped in real time. "What did I do?"

She looked at her small circle of real friends, ignored and embarrassed in a dark corner.

Heather had completely avoided them throughout the whole party and again for weeks after. Only after her new friends blackened her eye and stole her bicycle did she return to the ones she never should have left in the first place.

She didn't rush to the next mirror. She was embarrassed by the girl she had sometimes been and wished she could take back the moments where she had harmed others. She hadn't truly escaped jealousy but had simply beaten everyone else to the punch. She took what she wanted before anyone else had a chance and then inspired envy in them intentionally.

Subsequent mirrors played the audio of a question she had asked endless times.

"Am I your favorite?" she repeated again and again.

She posed it to her doctors and to her teachers. She had asked her parents and her friends and her boyfriends. She had consistently placed herself in a position to crawl toward the top, even if it meant leaving loved ones crying in her wake.

Heather tired of hearing the insecure question and was appropriately ashamed of the sins she had committed in the name of envy. She had to be the best at everything and when she wasn't, she turned away from it. Instead of learning to appreciate life on other levels, she simply shunned it. If she couldn't be the best, she didn't want to fight. She wanted to change playing fields altogether.

Heather walked away from the mirrors with more understanding than when she first faced them. She wished she had even a small chance at life so that she could mend her ways and make right where she had gone wrong.

Knowing there was no chance of her own survival, Heather pushed herself to finish. Finding the new door that would lead her out of the circular maze was difficult but she located it. It was beside the first mirror and when she looked into it, she saw that Lisa still sat crying on the bottom step. She pulled her eyes away and walked quickly into the next room.

Chapter 31

Imagine

She stood immobile in what appeared to be a police interrogation room. A large pane of glass took up an entire wall but she couldn't see what secrets waited on the other side. The light in the adjacent room had been dimmed and it blocked out everything on its side. All she could make out were dark shadows that moved at times and at other times, remained very still.

To her right she noticed another, smaller room attached. The sweet scent of chocolate cookies and the comfortable feel of a television turned on lured her toward its partially opened door. Heather didn't know which room held her last challenge but she felt a powerful pull to go back toward the two-way glass. Though her typical response would be to retreat to the shortcut, she couldn't. She had come this far and planned to finish. She wondered what stage of death her body was in back in Jade's world and prayed her family would be all right. She pictured her father standing up and caring for a minor graze but an image of his funeral kicked it out.

Heather walked over to the chair that faced the glass wall and sat down. She glanced at the light switch and had to close her eyes against its draw. She knew that it planned to shine light on the other side and she wasn't ready yet to see what was there. She had learned enough. Discovering her identity as the first woman in existence hadn't shaken her the way she had imagined such news would. On the contrary, Heather felt more calm and more in control. Memories of the lives subsequent to her life as Eve revealed themselves gently and she stored them neatly in her mental file cabinet. They weren't locked doors in a hidden hallway and they were available to her whenever she needed them. Her awareness had been unlocked.

She knew before walking in that she was about to face her own sloth and it worried her. The concern tried to steal the air from her lungs and she had to fight for each breath. She tried to remember on her own what she had so apathetic about that facing its results had become her ultimate challenge.

A door creaked and her chest felt as though it fell into her stomach. When the door opened wide enough, she saw clear shadows of two people whom she had loved dearly when they had shared her world with her. Their presence filled her with the love she had felt for them and her spirit was energized by the emotion. She knew the timing was no coincidence as she would need the strength and courage only love could offer. She gasped in too much air and gagged. She had missed them so much and couldn't help but cry. She knew Damon's parents were waiting to give her the rest of the answers.

"What's happening?" she cried.

Of all the questions that fought to come out, it was all she could think to say. She wanted run to them and throw her arms around their soft, meaty shoulders but the feeling

subsided quickly. When the light turned on to reveal them clearly, she didn't need to touch them physically. The love between them was powerful and it provided the touch she needed.

They had been her second set of parents, ones she had chosen as a confused teenager; they were the grandparents to her first son. They had been good to her and their hearts had been the purest she'd ever known. Heather knew that they felt her love and that words were unnecessary.

They sat in the chairs that faced hers and Carol spoke first.

"We've missed you, honey," she smiled.

She glowed like an angel and Heather felt that touching her would be spiritually unlawful. The sound of her voice made Heather start to cry. When they died, a part of her had gone with them and Heather felt not only their presence but she also remembered their loss.

"What's happening?" she asked again.

She heard the quiver in her voice and looked to Mickey for comfort, just as she had in the real world. He had been the gentlest man she had ever known.

"We're here for your decision," he answering, smiling.

"What am I deciding?" she asked.

Heather almost plugged her ears with her fingers to avoid hearing the answer.

"Don't be afraid, Heather. You've already learned so much. There's just a little bit left."

"I'm scared," Heather cried. "I remember who I was and I remember what happened with Adam but I don't remember anything else. What am I deciding?"

"You're deciding if the world should continue, of course," Mickey answered.

Heather wasn't certain she heard him right but her subconscious had already begun reacting. Her palms started to sweat and the shaking was impossible to contain. It was narcissistic to believe that she alone had the power to decide whether or not the world continued but then she remembered. This wasn't the first time she had this conversation and the *déjàvu* helped her to recall more. They had come to her before, in different bodies as different loved ones, but they had come before to tell her the same thing.

"I've been here before, haven't I?" she asked.

"Yes, honey," Carol answered. "Many, many times."

"This was my punishment for seducing Adam. How can sex be the ultimate sin when it's so beautiful?" Heather asked.

"Sex isn't bad at all. In fact, it's crucial. It wasn't about the sex, Heather. You always forget that part and you get so caught up in it in every life you live. Sex wasn't the sin. The sin was turning against the love of God and disobeying His orders. The sex would have come in

time. You only had to wait.”

Heather remembered. She closed her eyes to see more clearly and envisioned herself wrapped in Adam’s arms under the fig tree. The storm was coming toward them and the gray sky had turned their bright world into a nightmare they had never known. Shame filled their souls and they wanted only to cover themselves and hide.

God presented Himself to them through the storm. The thunder was His voice, the lightning was His presence, and the crashing waves were His anger. He had told them of His plan for man and how they had destroyed all that He had created. He told Eve she would continue to reincarnate, as man, woman and animal, and at the end of each life she would have to decide on its continued existence. The sin had been born in her heart and since she had wanted to make the decisions, she was cursed to do so for as long as she chose. He had deeply implanted a message that would always tell her when her death was near.

The number had come to her many times before. It had warned her of the end whenever her lives came to a close. The number had gained power throughout all the years Heather had been in existence and she understood why. It wasn’t just the predictor that warned her of her sins and her mortality. It was a premonition of an important time in the future. It was the last second on the Mayan calendar and the last second of the existence God planned for them. Heather had been trying to redeem her sins and fix what she had broken for thousands of years but had come no closer to doing so than she had when she started. The calendar had only three years left. Time was running out.

It was to be her burden and hers alone. After each of her lives, Heather returned to this same place, to the same painful lessons. At the end of each life, she was given the power of choice. She could surrender the world and allow Him destroy all that He had created so that He could begin again. She could allow Him to undo the existence of Adam and Eve and everything that followed in His effort to create the perfect world.

Heather didn’t want to give up. She knew that she was at the end of her life as Heather and that she had only a few short years to make things right. She knew that 2012 was right around the corner and that the others had started seeing the signs too. But she still didn’t want to give up. She still had faith in the world and wanted to find a way to add more time to their dying calendar. A thought occurred to her and Heather wondered why her decisions had to be made alone.

“What about Adam?” she asked.

“He’s in the room where you left him. He’s waiting for your answer too,” Carol answered grimly. “As long as the world exists, Adam will exist with it.”

“Why is he so angry with me?” she asked.

“He’s angry because he blames you for his fall. He’s never come to understand his role in the lust you two created together under that tree. His punishment is to reincarnate over and over again until you say it’s over and he has lived many terrible lives, not all human. He has no power over his existence and he wants for you to end it.”

“Why doesn't he have any power?”

“God took it from him. Adam blamed you for what you'd done and because he blamed his lack of power, he was stripped of it.”

“He finds you every lifetime and tries to make you end it,” Mickey offered. “He shows you hate and rage and pain and he tries to make you fail.”

Though it was new information, she wasn't surprised. She remembered the time he befriended her mother and abducted her when she was five years old. He had done terrible things to her in the body of that woman and Heather had blocked it out so that she could continue. Questions vied to take control and one made it through the filtering process.

“What about Jade?” Heather asked. “Why is her baby important to the world?”

Her voice was rushed and she made great efforts to slow down. The ghosts of the people she had loved and lost turned to each other and gave knowing looks. Heather wanted to know what they knew but she stayed quiet.

“If you decide to go back, you will be her baby, Heather,” Carol answered.

She fought the panic and allowed herself to take comfort from their words. She would be born to her sister and remain close to her sons. Her new mother would be good to her and would raise her with love. She and Jade had a connection and Heather decided if she could include her sister in the fight to save the world, humankind might still have a chance.

The tears she cried weren't only from her life as Heather. They came from the sea of all of the lives she had lived. She had dipped into the collective unconscious and been allowed to feel everything she had forgotten.

Heather closed her eyes and clenched her hands into tight fists. Carol touched her hand until she released the white-knuckled squeeze. The feel of her former mother-in-law's soft skin was better than a caress to her heart and Heather thought about the decision she had to make.

She slowly opened the fists and placed her hands on her lap with palms facing the ceiling. She needed to remember the lessons she'd learned as Heather in order to walk away from it. She felt as though she was losing Heather as she absorbed reality and she missed her already.

“You're letting go of Heather, that's true but she'll always be a part of you, Eve,” Carol said softly.

Hearing the name she had always known felt natural for her and she answered to it as she always had.

“I know,” she replied.

“You'll bring Heather with you, just as you brought the rest of them,” Mickey added.

She thought about the rest of them. She had loved others. Others had been part of her family. She remembered their presence. She knew that some of them traveled with her from one life to another and wondered when the rebirth would occur.

“You have to remember,” Carol said, obviously in tune to all of her thoughts. “You have to remember the bad and the good. You have to remember the love and the hate and understand the balance for rebirth to succeed.”

Heather thought about the world and of the bad that came with it. Soldiers fell from bullets, their heads exploding for the sake of freedom. Pedophiles touched children and ignored the scars they caused and of the monsters they created. Men raped women and children while nations taught prejudice and hatred. Fires destroyed, disease flourished and everyone forgot where they came from.

Heather realized that if she came back, she would be in danger immediately. Someone would be looking for her, someone who wanted the world to end and whose loss of hope and control had become the catalyst for spreading even more hatred. Someone who was patiently counting until the last second on the clock ticked an explosive ending to everything in existence. Someone who would be very unhappy to see her reborn and fear her ability to beg God for more time. But that’s exactly what she planned to do. She had to convince God that man should be given another chance, another calendar.

Images of Dr. Angel took up what space was left in her mind. She wondered why he hadn’t made an appearance in her dream and considered that he may not have been real all along. She thought maybe she had created him in her effort to maintain sanity in Heather’s world. He had been gentle and patient; he hadn’t abandoned her or abused her in any way. He had known her better than anyone and he had always guided her to the answers she knew in her heart.

“Dr. Angel?” she asked softly.

“He was never real?”

“No, honey, he’s real. He’s been with you for a very

long time. You keep him with you to remind you and to direct you. In Heather’s life, you made him your doctor but in other lives he’s been your husband, your father and your child. If you continue, you’ll find him again.”

She thought of Billy or Adam; she wasn’t sure what name to call him in her head. He was two different men who shared one soul and it was the hardest reality to grasp. He would be looking for her.

The voice from nowhere spoke. It was her own voice but she knew it didn’t come from any part of her. It was God. It had always been God calling out to her in her own voice. She thought of the phone call she received during her mother’s dinner and got goose bumps, then found it strange that she could still be afflicted by such a human reaction.

He had always been with her and had always stayed close. Though the religions and their teachings had been wrong, many of the followers had found goodness of heart because

of it. They had organized their beliefs into a community, finding it easier to believe the unbelievable as a group. They gained strength from their faith and didn't deserve to be pitied or abandoned, just as they had no right to judge the next person.

She looked at her in-laws and smiled at them. Weightlessness came with understanding and her perceptions were no longer coming from Heather. It was the acknowledgment of the One she had always been. Heather had only been her latest lesson, her most recent reality. She wondered if she even had a body anymore and felt relieved when she looked down to see that she was still standing upon legs.

"Do you remember?" Mickey asked.

She nodded. Despite all of her questions still demanding their moment, she needed the answer to only one more.

"Is this punishment? Is He angry with me?" she asked.

"No, sweetie," Mickey said. "You're not being punished. He loves you so much and you serve an important purpose. Don't forget, he created you. He knew the choices you would make and He put you by Adam's side anyway."

Heather walked past the glass that separated the investigation room from the one they were in. She opened the door and walked inside. Nobody was there but a long wooden coffee table sat alone in the middle of the room. It waited for her answer to the ultimate question, as did everyone in the rooms she had already visited.

Heather walked over to the coffee table and bowed her head. After a silent prayer, she lifted her head slowly and smiled. Without hesitation, she lifted her legs one at a time and climbed onto the table. As she lifted her hands into the air, tears glistened in her eyes and she smiled.

"I'm going back," she said just before she jumped.

Chapter 32

Wish You Were Here

Jade screamed as the doctors pulled the baby from her womb.

After cleaning his tiny, messy body, the kind pudgy nurse placed Jade's newborn in her arms and she looked deeply into the eyes of her first child. She looked at him through tears. Jade cried out of happiness at her the arrival of her son and out of grief for the departure of her sister.

The waiting room was filled with friends and family. Her father sat in a hard chair as he awaited news of his grandson's birth. A clean bandage covered the area of his neck where he had been grazed by the minister's bullet. He stared at the clock on the wall and couldn't help but smile. It was 11:11 in the evening and the wind whistled as it passed the open window of the break room.

Laurie, Tim and John sat close by as they prayed for a safe and healthy birth. They had only just come from the morgue downstairs where they kissed Heather goodbye one last time. Tommy and Jack were at home with their dads, trying to prepare for a new life without their mother. Erin and Angie banged on the soda machine to retrieve their snack or their lost coins. Their anger came more from the loss of their friend than the loss of their soda. Frankie and Jeannie sat in chairs in the corner, staring off into space. Lisa and her family sat huddled together in an adjacent lobby. None of them spoke to each other or anyone else. Their grief filled the room and suspended sound.

The doctor came out and announced to the group that the baby had arrived, alive and well. Although everyone was happy, no hands went joyously into the air and no cheer escaped the group. Heather had only died of a drug overdose hours before and none of them was truly capable of joy quite yet.

After allowing the nurses to take her baby away so that she could have a short nap, Jade closed her eyes and imagined her sister. She remembered her last words.

Look for me, she had said.

The nurses arrived at the nursery and placed the new child into his tiny waiting hospital bed. They cleared his nose and his mouth and tested his reflexes. They cooed over the way he seemed to smile already and at how happy their new little resident was. He didn't cry or fuss or demand their attention. On the contrary, the baby boy seemed perfectly at peace.

The young nurse who wheeled him in noticed a man looking through the glass. She assumed by the way he stared at the infant that he must be family. She gathered her purse and keys and gave orders to the nurse at shift change. When she walked out of the nursery, she glanced back at the happy man who still smiled and stared at the child.

"He's a good baby already," she said and walked down the hall before exiting the double doors.

“Yes,” he answered distractedly after the nurse had already walked out. He was smiling and appeared mesmerized. The man walked toward the glass and placed a hand against it as though he longed to touch the infant.

He pulled a red bandana from his pocket and knotted it at the back of his head, all the while staring at the brand new baby boy in the blue bassinet.

“All is finally well,” he said softly as he reached his hand into the other pocket.

Chapter Titles

Each chapter is named for a favorite song.

- Chapter 1* Christian Woman by Type O Negative
Chapter 2 Witchy Woman by The Eagles
Chapter 3 Rage Against the Machine (album) by
Rage Against the Machine
Chapter 4 November Rain by Guns and Roses
Chapter 5 Live to Tell by Madonna
Chapter 6 Psycho by Puddle of Mud
Chapter 7 True Colors by Cyndi Lauper
Chapter 8 Love Me Dead by Ludo
Chapter 9 Gone Away by The Offspring
Chapter 10 Lightning Crashes by Live
Chapter 11 Strawberry Fields by The Beatles
Chapter 12 Dreams by The Cranberries
Chapter 13 Somebody Told Me by The Killers
Chapter 14 Like A Prayer by Madonna
Chapter 15 Like A Pill by Pink
Chapter 16 Pretty Piece of Flesh by One Inch Punch
Chapter 17 Take on Me by Aha
Chapter 18 I Miss You by Blink 182
Chapter 19 Again by Lenny Kravitz
Chapter 20 I've Never Been to Me by Charlene
Chapter 21 Seven Nation Army by The White Stripes
Chapter 22 The Kids Aren't Alright by The Offspring
Chapter 23 Sister Christian by Knight Ranger
Chapter 24 Like A Stone by Audioslave
Chapter 25 The Red by Chevelle
Chapter 26 Nymphetamine by Cradle of Filth
Chapter 27 This Woman's Work by Maxwell
Chapter 28 Smooth Criminal by Alien Ant Farm
Chapter 29 Sex and Candy by Marcy Playground
Chapter 30 Hate Me by Blue October
Chapter 31 Imagine by The Beatles
Chapter 32 Wish You Were Here by Pink Floyd

Credit also goes to the following
for inspiring certain parts of the story

Edgar Cayce: *Philosopher*

Talking Heads: *Psycho Killer*

Smashing Pumpkins: *Bullets with Butterfly Wings*

Tommie Who and Colleen Farrell: *Legacy*

Steven Tyler: *Come Together*

God: Creator
Satan: Destroyer
Adam and Eve: Mom and Dad
Ellie Crystal: Author and Webmaster
Antonio Banderas: Actor
All organized religion
The Cheesecake Factor: Great restaurant
Family Guy: Funniest show ever
Music Box Dancer: Frank Mills
The Mayans: Little geniuses
Jimmy Eat World: Great band
Skipper and Gilligan: Gilligan's Island
Jim Morrison: Legendary artist
Steven Tyler: Inspiration for every man I chose
Bloody Mary: Inspiration for fear
Makers of Xanax: Inspiration for nothing



About the author

Doreen Serrano is a social worker who lives in Valrico, Florida with her two sons. She has degrees in human services and criminal justice and has always known she would one day write a book. The story of 11:11 is one based on true events and deeply seated in her personal take on reality.

Doreen has written her way into good situations and out of bad ones since she was very young. As she struggled with her personal dilemmas and signs she couldn't ignore, Doreen decided to finally share her story on paper.

During the journey of writing her book, Doreen watched as her story started to evolve and head toward an ending even she didn't foresee. When asked why she finally decided to tell her tale, she answered, "I couldn't tell it until I lived it."



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